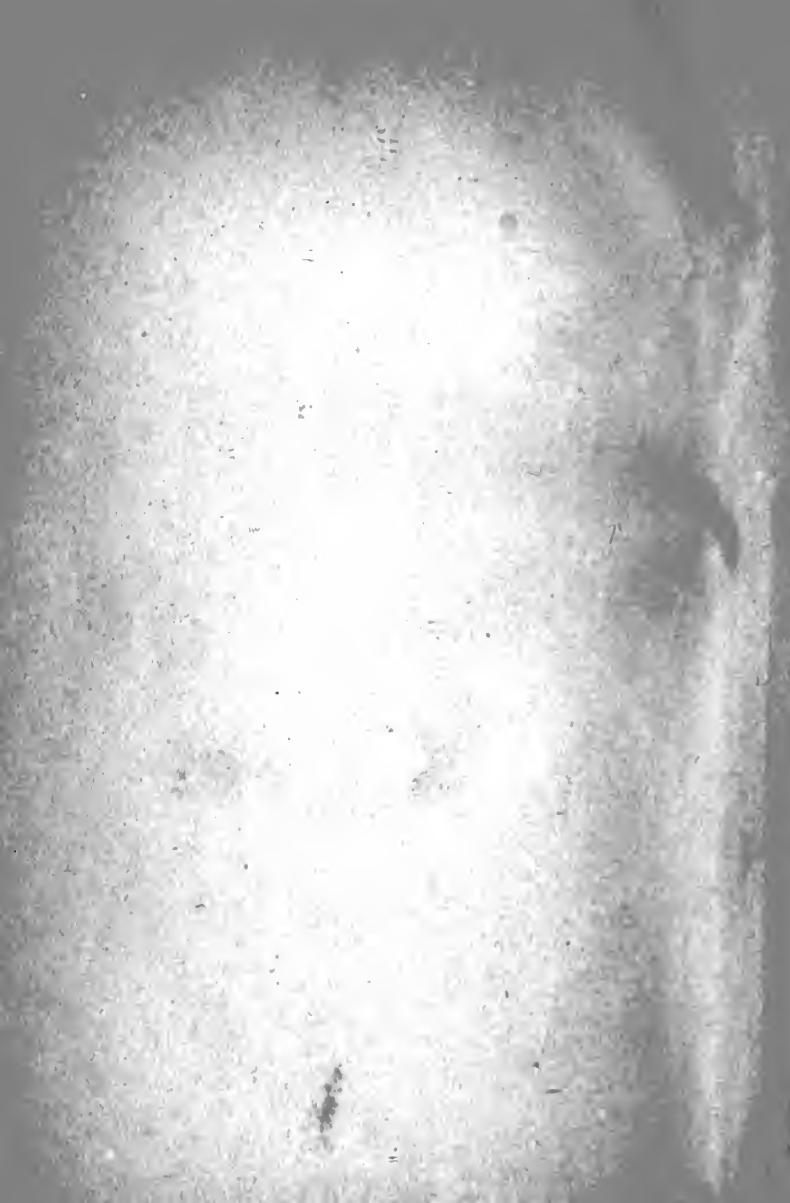




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VIOLET MORTIMER.

1883.
A Nobel.

BY
FRANCES NOBLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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—
1879.

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VIOLET MORTIMER.



CHAPTER I.

THE next two days passed pleasantly with the Woodfords and their visitors, in excursions about the neighbourhood, boating on the lake, rambling among the hills at Ambleside, and among its many romantic spots. In the evening came the pleasant, social dinner, and an unceremonial dance between the young people before they all retired.

“You are sure to enjoy the ball, darling,” said Nelly, on one occasion to Violet, “you are such a nice dancer. One would never guess you had not been used to it. You are more graceful than I am ; they tell me I jump about too much, but I can’t help it when I get into it.”

“What a bad opinion you have of your own performances, Nelly,” replied Violet ; “but in

spite of it I could venture to predict that you'll dance more than I shall at the ball."

"Well, we'll see, my dear. Is Norman Ashleigh a good partner? But I don't suppose you know?"

"No, I don't, Nelly. I've never happened to dance with him or to see him dance. I have only been out to quiet evenings, yet, where we did not dance."

"Violet, don't think me silly, is Mr. Ashleigh handsome? I've never seen him for years, for he was away when Mrs. Ashleigh came to stay with us before we went to London. I was quite little when I saw him last, and then he was a very good-looking boy. I want your opinion."

"Well, then, Nelly, he is handsome, very, I think."

And Violet did not blush or betray herself; she had grown accustomed to speaking calmly of Norman to Nelly. A real, earnest friendship had already grown up between these two young girls, and, much to the disappointment of one or two of the young men staying in the house, Nelly was so much with Violet as to seem to hold herself aloof from them. It was not that Nelly was averse to

their society, or to a little harmless flirting, but at present she was so sincerely attracted by her new friend, that her company and conversation were pleasanter to her than those of the others. She felt, though ignorant of the story of Violet's love, that she herself, though older in years and in experience of the world's pleasures and customs, and having a much wider circle of acquaintance than Violet, was yet inferior to her in experience of the deeper feelings of the heart and of all emotion, whether of joy or pain. And Nelly could not help having a certain suspicion of her own concerning Violet; but she kept it to herself, as well as the knowledge which had dawned upon her of what a lonely, unloved life Violet's had been before she went to Ashleigh Court.

Mr. Wilmot looked with no favourable eye upon Nelly, for his chances of a *tête-à-tête* with Violet were rendered very rare through her constant presence, and besides this, he did not like her on her own account, for Miss Nelly was, he found, quite a match for him. On one or two occasions when he had addressed a gallant speech to her, she had with difficulty concealed her impatience, and had let him see plainly that she was laughing at

him. She often told Violet that he was a "sentimental humbug," and learnt in return that his marked admiration was distasteful to Violet herself, as indeed Nelly already knew.

The third day of Violet's stay at Windermere was that on which Norman would arrive at home. That evening the Woodfords had fresh visitors at dinner, and in the midst of the gay company and the evening's amusements, Violet's thoughts were abstracted from everything around her, as her fancy pictured Norman's arrival, his meeting with his mother, and how very much they would have to say to each other. And she herself here, away from them! Would Norman miss her? would he feel even a little regret that she was not there to welcome him? did he look forward with any pleasure to meeting her again? Surely he would come, he would not refuse to accompany Mrs. Ashleigh?

The next morning her last doubt was set at rest, for Mrs. Woodford received a letter from Mrs. Ashleigh, written an hour or two after Norman's arrival home, saying that he would accompany her to Windermere, and that they hoped to be with them on the day following that on which Mrs. Woodford

received her letter. And there was a letter too for Violet, for Mrs. Ashleigh could not refrain from writing to her dear girl in her gladness at her son's return, to tell all the little home incidents of his arrival; and every detail was dear to Violet.

"He looks very well," she wrote, "though a little tired and weary, and finds home very pleasant; but he is quite determined to accept Mrs. Woodford's invitation. He will be so glad to see you again, my love; he will miss you this evening, he bids me tell you, when we are sitting together and you will not be here to listen to his music or to sing for us as usual. He has so much to say to me, my love, that I cannot write more. I am pleased you are enjoying yourself; I knew you would like them all, and am glad you have made a friend of dear little Nelly. Norman has brought a nice portrait of Mrs. Lacy, which I will bring to show you. Good-bye until we meet again, my love."

The news gave general satisfaction.

"Norman is a great favourite with us, Miss Mortimer," Major Woodford said to Violet, and it will be a real pleasure to welcome him amongst us, especially as he has kept himself

so very private for the last three or four years. My old friend his father would have been very proud to have seen his son grow to be such a fine young man."

Harry's pleasure was unmitigated at the idea of meeting his old college friend again. He had told Nelly that the moonlight expedition on the lake should not come off under his auspices until Norman arrived and could join in it.

"You can fix the first fine night now, girls, if you wish," he said to his sisters, when he knew Norman was coming.

Eleanor Gordon heard all the talk about Norman Ashleigh with apparent indifference; but she could not help feeling a great curiosity to see this young man, of whom everyone seemed to make so much, but whom she was resolved beforehand to dislike. It was by his persuasion, most likely, she felt convinced, that Mrs. Ashleigh had held herself aloof from them, for Eleanor was strongly disposed to believe that Violet had not been slow to tell him what kind of a life hers had been in London. "And he seems to have made quite a fool of himself with her, giving her such presents and bestowing so much time upon

her, unless she has exaggerated it all, which is very likely."

And outwardly Eleanor kept up the semblance of affection for Violet, especially before Louisa and Major and Mrs. Woodford. It was not quite so easy with Nelly, because Eleanor never felt certain as to what Violet might have told her.

More than once Eleanor contrived to name Norman to Violet in a manner calculated to make her betray her secret by showing confusion or agitation; but Violet was determined that she should not have the gratification of finding it out, for Eleanor was the last person she would have wished to know it, so she managed to speak calmly in return, without showing any resentment, though the proud young heart burned for the moment at Eleanor's evident unfeeling curiosity.

But there was one who viewed Norman's coming with neither pleasure nor indifference, and that was Louis Wilmot. As yet he had succeeded so badly with Violet, and she contrived to hedge herself in so completely from him by coldness and politeness, that he was almost losing hope. But in his rage

he determined he would not be baffled, even though in one short day more that unbearable, haughty Norman Ashleigh would come once again between them. If Violet could have read Mr. Wilmot's thoughts as he sat by her at dinner the evening before Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman were to arrive, she would have shuddered and shrunk still more than ever from him.

“Little goose!” he was thinking; “does she imagine it is for herself that I have wasted my time and made a fool of myself to her for so long, I wonder? And yet, of course, I have intended her to think so, and it cannot be that the prize I have promised myself will, after all, escape me, and become the property of this Ashleigh, who has taught her to worship the very ground he walks on. Why should he come between me and the wealth I have striven so hard to gain? he is rich, he does not want it! Have I for nothing tried to rid her of her absurd whim, and humbled myself to a child to make her look favourably on me and forget him? It *cannot* be that my race for wealth shall fail!”

And later in the evening, when Violet happened to be sitting a little apart, he came

and sat by her ; but though he spoke to her, she hardly knew what he said, so absorbed was she in thinking of the morrow.

“I shall have great pleasure in meeting Mrs. Ashleigh again, Miss Mortimer,” he said, “and her son too, though my acquaintance with him is so slight. Ah! you are glad too, Miss Mortimer! How happy should I be if I thought that one day *my* coming near you would cause you pleasure! Surely I may hope? Tell me, Miss Mortimer, that——” and he even there would have taken her hand as he spoke, but Violet rose quickly, trembling at what she knew would come if she stayed, and her action attracted the notice of her faithful Nelly, who was laughing and talking with a gentleman a few yards off, and with quick instinct came to Violet’s rescue.

“Oh, Violet, do come here and help me to refute Mr. Lambert! I can’t bring him round to my opinion on one thing,” and she made Violet sit by her, not seeing the dark look bent on her by Mr. Wilmot, and probably caring little even if she guessed it was there. She did not name Mr. Wilmot that night to Violet when they were alone, not wishing to

distress her, and Violet did not mention the little episode she had interrupted. And she even tried wholly to forget it, and to tell herself that it could never again be attempted, for in her happiness in the thought of the morrow she could afford to think lightly of any annoyance. Her heart was almost too full of trembling expectation and joy to admit of sleep, and the night seemed very, very long.

When the day came, Violet hardly knew how she got through it, appearing unconcerned and as usual. Mr. Wilmot made no effort to address her again, and she hoped that she had silenced him effectually. Mrs. Ashleigh and Norman would not arrive until six o'clock, in time to dress for dinner, at which there was to be rather a large party this evening, so Violet would not see them until just dinner time. She tried to laugh and talk with Nelly as usual, as they made their toilet together, but she was sadly absent and remiss, and kept falling into those reveries which were common with her, but which had been less frequent here at Windermere, with merry, chattering Nelly always by her side. And Norman's message to her in Mrs. Ashleigh's letter was ever recurring to her mind. "He

will be glad to see me, he said he missed me," she kept on telling herself. And why was she so careful over the dressing of her hair this evening? why did she look so often in her glass when she was dressed, so much oftener than usual?

Violet would have blushed to avow the reason even to herself, but the reason was there nevertheless. And why did she feel such pleasure when Nelly surveyed her all over, saying admiringly,—

"Oh, you darling, how nice you look! and you pretending you've no beauty! Don't look at me with those brown eyes of yours, if you want me to believe you. Scarlet and white become you better than anything. That is the prettiest dress you've got, and I'd like to steal it. Well, if you're ready, let us go down, for I'm longing to see Mrs. Ashleigh, and of course perfectly dying to behold that wonderful Norman."

"Will he be in the drawing-room before us?" Violet wondered in her agitation. Hardly, she thought, so soon after his arrival; and the assurance relieved her. Nelly must have felt her tremble as they entered the drawing-room. One look round satisfied Violet

that she had her wish, and Norman was not there. A great many of the guests had arrived, and Nelly and Violet made their way across to a quiet corner, where Louis Wilmot soon spied them. He came and sat down by Violet, who was nearer to hating him just now than she had ever been before. He might have forgotten entirely what had occurred between himself and Violet on the previous evening, for he talked easily and pleasantly to her and Nelly. As they sat, Mrs. Woodford came to tell Violet that the Ashleighs had arrived punctually and were now upstairs. "It was such a real pleasure to see my old favourite Norman again," she said. "He was asking for you, my love," she added as she left them. And so Violet knew now that Norman must come in directly and find her sitting next Mr. Wilmot, for the latter evinced not the slightest intention of removing from her side. She hardly knew a word he was saying, and he perceived that she did not. The door opened at length, and Violet's heart beat painfully fast as she looked up and saw that it was Norman Ashleigh who entered. For a minute she could not take away her eyes from the noble face, so well remembered, the tall, slender figure, which towered even

above Major Woodford, who advanced to meet him as he entered. Then Harry took his arm and introduced him to one or two who were near them. Norman had not once looked towards that end of the room where Violet sat, but she saw every movement of his, and Louis Wilmot never took his eyes from her.

“Norman, old fellow,” Harry was saying (“I may call you so still, I suppose, in consideration of the old school days?”), I want to introduce you to my future brother-in-law, Charles Acton, and we shall find my sisters somewhere about. You’ll hardly recognise Nelly, I daresay.”

And Harry and Norman were soon speaking to Louisa Woodford and her lover, and sitting by Miss Woodford was Eleanor Gordon. Violet saw Norman’s face change as he heard her name, and he looked at her closely on being introduced. And as Eleanor looked at Norman, whom she had almost sworn to hate, for the life of her she could not help her bow being less haughty than she had intended. Was this Norman Ashleigh, then—this gentleman who looked fit to be a prince, with that air of superiority and command, which sat so gracefully upon him?

Had he, the owner of that pale, handsome face, been the one who had made a fool of himself, as she called it, with Violet—Violet, whom she had despised and ill-treated! Eleanor was terribly annoyed with herself for allowing the mere sight of Norman to subdue her resolution to give him the coldest, haughtiest greeting consistent with politeness; but she had been powerless to keep her resolve, and Norman passed on while she was still blaming herself for her weakness.

Just then Norman chanced to look towards the corner where Violet sat with Nelly and Mr. Wilmot. He saw her, and their eyes met for a moment, then Harry Woodford glanced in the same direction.

“Ha! there is Miss Mortimer. You have not seen her yet, Norman, of course, since you arrived.”

As they approached, only Violet saw the look Norman bent for an instant on Louis Wilmot. It brought to her mind that evening at Mrs. Arnott’s when they had first met him. Little had Violet thought, when she had pictured the meeting with Norman again, that it would take place away from Ashleigh Court, with Louis Wilmot sitting at her

side ! And now Norman was standing before her, and Violet's heart beat terribly fast as she let him take her hand, and as, holding it within his own, he spoke the simple words of greeting,—

“ Violet, I am very glad to see you again.”

His voice was very low and very earnest as he said those simple words, and as she felt the pressure of his hand Violet tried to look up, but failed, and so she did not see, as her companions did, the tender, earnest gaze with which Norman was looking down upon her.

She could find no word to say to him, and in another moment he had released her hand, bowed to Mr. Wilmot, and was renewing his acquaintance with Nelly.

“ You were a little girl when we met last, Miss Nelly,” Violet heard him say ; “ you will hardly remember me, I suppose ? ”

“ Well, I don't think I should have known you, Mr. Ashleigh,” Nelly replied ; and then Mrs. Woodford, approaching Norman, engaged his attention, and as she sat down at some distance from Violet, he took his seat by her and was soon talking with her and several gentlemen who stood near, and who

almost hid him from Violet's view. She was very calm now, the colour had faded from her face again; she felt nothing at the moment so much as a wish to be away somewhere, away from the restraint of company. So this had been their meeting, after the parting they had had, and the long months of separation!

Violet, just then, did not consider how else it could have been; she only felt a dull pain gnawing at her heart as she told herself that her joy and expectation had been vain, that Norman cared not for her, that the past happy friendship even must be forgotten. He had pressed her hand, it is true, he had spoken his few words as though he meant much and would have said more; but how calm, how unmoved he had been, while a thousand emotions had agitated her beating heart! In her overwhelming sense of disappointment, she forgot that Norman was not one to betray much emotion before strangers, and that she herself had spoken no word to him and might to him have appeared indifferent and unmoved. Ah! it was so different to the way she had so often pictured Norman's return, when she had

thought to welcome him by Mrs. Ashleigh's side, in the dear home of Ashleigh Court! She only knew now how strong had been her hope, when she felt the dreary weight that seemed to have disenchanted her of her happiness. Nelly saw that Violet was pre-occupied and in deep thought, and did not talk to her; but Mr. Wilmot, who triumphed in the brief greeting she had been allowed to exchange with Norman, and guessing perhaps why she sat so quiet and so very still now, was less kind, and talked gaily, until he roused her to the knowledge that she was in company, where even her very aspect might betray her deep dejection. What had been Norman's thoughts on seeing Mr. Wilmot by her side? she asked herself. Had he been indifferent, or had it been partly that that had made his greeting so brief, that had caused him to pass on as though he had seen her but yesterday? There was a gleam of hope in the idea that roused Violet to talk almost gaily, with a forced merriment, to Mr. Wilmot, as though to take revenge on him and hide from him what was passing in her heart; and she succeeded so well as to astonish him and make him wonder if after all he had been

wrong in supposing that her love was so entirely given to Norman Ashleigh. He did not know yet Violet's strong will and proud nature; he thought her a child incapable of controlling and hiding from his experienced eye the inner emotions of her soul.

As they were talking, Mrs. Ashleigh entered, and Violet rose at once to meet her. There was no trembling hesitation now; she was sure of grandmamma's love, and she felt, as the dear familiar kiss was pressed upon her lips, that so long as this beloved friend was spared, she could never be lonely or unloved.

"How well you look, my love!" Mrs. Ashleigh whispered. "My little Violet comes up to the fairest of them to-night. You have seen Norman, my darling?"

"Oh, yes, grandmamma. I am so very glad he has come back safe to you."

"I thank God for it every hour, Violet. And you are glad to see him too, eh, my love? We shall be so happy again at home together."

"Of course, grandmamma;" and Violet turned away to hide the blush that rose to her cheek, and she was almost glad that they

were interrupted by dinner being announced. A stranger offered his arm to Violet, and at table she could hardly see Norman at all, as he sat on the same side with herself, with several persons between them. She kept up the conversation with the gentleman next her with such animation as to make Eleanor, who sat nearly opposite, wonder more than ever ~~at~~ the change that had taken place in the dowdy little Violet of the old London days. When the ladies left the room, Violet did not know that Norman's eyes were fixed upon her, following her until she passed out of sight. And in the drawing-room she began to feel the strain she had put upon her feelings to exert herself to talk with such seeming light-heartedness, and she was glad that she could escape to a quiet part of the room near one of the deep bay windows, where she sat half hidden by the curtains, looking out into the lake. She did not even fear Nelly coming to her, as she saw she was busily engaged talking to some ladies, from whom she would not soon escape. So Violet sat on in her reverie, thinking of how bright and joyous she had felt at this hour the previous day, and then telling herself she had had no right to

expect that her meeting with Norman would be other than it had proved.

She told herself she had been foolish and vain to suppose he might love her, or that because he had been so kind to her during the past days, when she had been little more than a child, that now, when he returned home and met her again, no longer a child but a woman, he must continue his old familiar kindness.

“Violet!”

And the chilly desolation seemed to be all at once lifted from her heart as her name was pronounced by the voice she loved so well, for Norman stood beside her, with a very deep, tender gaze in those attractive grey eyes, as they were bent upon her. She could look up now, for there was no one very near, and Norman sat down beside her in her window seat.

“Don’t send me away. I have come in before the rest on purpose to find you, for I want to have a good look at you, little Violet. Let me call you so, if only once more, in memory of the old days. Why would you not speak to me, why were you so cold? Don’t you remember your

promise to welcome me when I came back ? ”

“ I could not help it,” she murmured; “ you know I *do* wish to welcome you. Forgive me, you know it was not that I was not glad to see you, Norman; ” and as he looked into her blushing face, he met a half-reproachful glance.

“ Then you *are* glad to see me, Violet. How strange it seems to meet you again amongst all these people, and to find you grown into a fashionable young lady, who will perhaps not allow me to call her ‘ little Violet ’ any longer, or to talk to her as I used to do in the past days ! ”

“ Oh, Norman, don’t say that ! Let me be ‘ little Violet ’ still. I was so happy then. Let it be all the same now ; ” and then she blushed at her own earnestness.

“ God bless you for those words, Violet,” and in the deepening twilight Norman made prisoner of the little hand which rested on her knee. “ I wonder if you have missed me as I have you, little Violet ? ” and he seemed to be thinking deeply as he looked out over the lake, then turning again towards his companion, he said with a smile, “ Do

you know, Violet, you are altered ; your face is no longer that of a child ; but I shall learn to like the change, to like it better than the old way. "But you've not grown much," and Norman laughed as his eyes were bent with an undeniable expression of admiration on the dark, expressive face looking up to his.

"How can you tell, Norman ?" asked Violet, merrily ; "you've not seen me stand up yet."

"Where do you suppose my eyes were, Violet, when you were leaving the dining-room ? I shall have to confess that I made a pretty close observation of you, then ; but I will ask your pardon now for my impertinence," he said, gaily.

"Well, I will grant it, though it was too bad of you, Norman. I don't care in the least that I'm not tall ; you know I never expected to be, so don't pity me."

"Do not fear, for I like you best as you are, little Violet."

And Violet's heart, so full of happiness already, thrilled afresh at the tenderness of Norman's tone.

"How well my mother looks. You have kept your promise well concerning her ; and

I want to thank you very, very much for all you have been to her during my absence."

"Why should you thank me, Norman? You know what she is to me, and what should I have done without her?"

Norman did not speak again, immediately; but after a pause he said, somewhat abruptly,—

"Violet, you are not weary or lonely yet at Ashleigh Court? You do not wish to leave us for any other home, any gayer company?" and he looked very earnestly into Violet's face.

"Leave Ashleigh Court! Oh, how could you ask me, Norman? Where should I want to go? Where else could I be happy?" And then, fearing she had said too much, Violet turned away to hide her confusion.

But she did not appear to have said too much, for Norman smiled with pleasure as he spoke again,—

"Thank you, Violet; then it is all right, and you are not tired of us. Do you know, the day I arrived home, I could not fancy you were away, and I kept looking round for you. And in the evening I wanted so much to hear you sing."

What could Violet say? She could not

tell him that she had longed to stay at home to welcome him ; she could not tell him how she had missed him, how wholly he had occupied her thoughts during his absence, in short, she could not tell him her love. *He* could tell *her* everything he felt ; he might tell her how he had missed her, might talk to her as he pleased ; but with her it was different ; she might only listen, wondering at the joy that was all around her again, as she sat with Norman by her side once more, after these many days of doubt and longing. So Norman went on, after a pause,—

“ I have been already introduced to Miss Gordon, as I think you know.”

“ Yes, and don't you think her very handsome ? ”

Norman smiled.

“ Well, she is, I believe ; but I did not look at her long. I was anxious to speak to a certain young lady who had nothing to say to me when I came to her, and would hardly look at me after my long absence.”

“ Norman, why do you make me tell you that it was because I was so glad to see you that I could say nothing to you, then, with so many persons near, too,” said Violet, quickly,

as she blushed, not looking at Norman as she spoke.

"You must forgive me, Violet; but I was determined to make you say you are glad to see me. You had not once really told me so yet, and I have a peculiar fancy for being welcomed, you see. I have all sorts of messages for you from my aunt, for she says she feels as though you were a personal friend of hers, though she has never seen you."

"She is very kind. I should like to see her so much. Do you know, I hoped until quite lately you would bring her home with you."

"I hoped so myself; but she never had much hope of being able to come to England. If you could have seen her as I found her when I arrived out there first, and were to see her now, you would know how wonderful her cure has been. But she *must* feel lonely sometimes, so far away."

"You must have found it hard at last to leave her."

"From that point of view the journey was painful; but I was coming home, you know, to Ashleigh Court, and you do not know how

I longed, selfishly perhaps, to be in England once more ; ” then, seeing how thoughtful Violet looked, he went on in a gayer tone, “ I paid a visit, yesterday, to poor little Charley. He will soon begin to want you again. Has he behaved well during my absence ? ” he asked, laughingly.

“ Of course he has. How could you insult him by asking such a question about him,” and Violet looked up, merrily.

“ Poor Charley ! Well, you must ride with me very often, now, Violet. You will have no excuse now you are your own mistress, and there will be no Miss Lyndsay to scold me for taking you away from your lessons.”

“ Indeed, Norman, I was very sorry when she left, and I’m sure I shall miss her very much.”

“ I wonder if you would ever say so much of me, little Violet ? Suppose, then, we ask Miss Lyndsay to come again, and you have another year of lessons ? ” and Norman looked mischievously into Violet’s face.

“ Oh, I did not mean that, you know, Norman ; ” and he smiled at the dismay she could not keep from appearing in her countenance.

Here most of the gentlemen entered the

drawing-room, and Norman and Violet felt they must leave their quiet window seat and join the rest.

Violet felt in a maze of happiness, which lent a colour to her cheeks and even additional beauty to her soft brown eyes. Ah! how she was reproaching herself now for the sorrowful, repining thoughts she had indulged in until Norman dispelled them. She had called him cold and changed, and all the while he had been thinking of her and had come to seek her and talk to her with all or more than his old kindness and even tenderness! It gave her pain to think how she had wronged him, but he would have forgiven her if she could have told him. She left him now with a smile, and went and sat by Mrs. Ashleigh, who looked kindly at the young face, which happiness made appear positively beautiful, as she said,—

“ I have been longing to talk to you, love, but I saw that you and Norman were having a quiet *tête-à-tête*, and I would not disturb you. Has he been telling you all his news about India, my love? ”

Violet blushed slightly. They had not been thinking much of news, either of them.

“He was talking to me, grandmamma.”

“Ah! I daresay he found plenty to say. News seldom gets properly told at a first meeting of friends after a long separation. There is always so much else to say beforehand. Is he not looking well?” and then Mrs. Ashleigh showed her Mrs. Lacy’s portrait, which Norman had brought, and as they talked together, Violet told grandmamma how the time had been passed since her arrival at Windermere, of her friendship with Nelly, and the kindness of all her new friends. And they spoke, too, of Eleanor, whose meeting with Mrs. Ashleigh had been polite, but nothing more. With her, at least, she had exercised self-command, and concealed her resentful dislike under a veil of cold, haughty deference. How could she be otherwise towards her who had helped to make Violet what she was, who had taken her to her rich, luxurious home, of which perhaps she might one day be mistress, as it seemed likely? and since Eleanor had seen Norman, that which she had affected to despise looked very fair and worth striving for, and a new and unaccustomed jealousy of Violet was fast taking possession of her heart.

Mr. Wilmot, determined not to be baulked of his prize without a struggle, came and sat near Violet as she was with Mrs. Ashleigh, who behaved to him with gentle politeness, but yet was somewhat distant, for she could have dispensed with him just now, and she knew his presence was distasteful to Violet. And the latter, in her happiness, felt, as it were, safe from Louis Wilmot. Norman was at home again, was near her once more, and she could afford to speak gently and kindly even to Mr. Wilmot, in the fulness of the joy in her heart. And unconsciously her eyes kept seeking Norman as he sat or moved about the room.

“There could never be anyone like Norman!” was her thought as she looked at the face which had so haunted her dreams during that weary absence. Violet had never been with Norman in so large a company before, and now she was struck more than ever by the perfect ease and dignity of his deportment, as she felt that he was superior even in outward appearance to the rest of the young men who were present. She watched him as he talked with Eleanor a short time, and she could not fail to perceive that towards him her

manner grew less haughty, nay, almost gracious, and very different from what might have been expected from one of her character. Violet did not know that Eleanor could scarcely help herself now, that her selfish heart, though as yet she would not own it to herself, was stirred by a feeling wholly new to her, which was inspired by Norman's presence. Yes, Eleanor was beginning to feel that she was not so wholly proof against the softer feelings of the heart as she had imagined, and however irritating to her pride was the discovery, especially that it was Norman Ashleigh who had such power over her, she could not help it, there was that about him which charmed and fascinated her in spite of herself.

Once or twice Louis Wilmot saw Norman glance across at Violet as she sat talking to him, and he saw with triumph that his brow contracted with a troubled sternness for the moment his eye rested on her. Mr. Wilmot exerted his utmost to keep Violet in close conversation, so that she should not perceive Norman looking at her and thus be recalled to herself. But soon Mrs. Woodford came forward and asked Violet to sing for them, as she usually did in the course of the

evening. Mrs. Ashleigh turned to Violet, too, and joined in the request, "Do, my love;" and she named a song which it chanced Violet had not sung since she had been with the Woodfords. It was a great favourite of Norman's, and he had been accustomed always to play the accompaniment for her before he went away. He heard his mother ask Violet to sing it now, and some impulse prompted him to leave Eleanor's side and go quickly to where Violet sat.

"Will you let me play it for you?" he asked.

If Norman had wished to try whether his request would please Violet, he must have been amply satisfied, for the blush rose to her cheek and pleasure shone in her eyes as, with an earnest "Oh, thank you," she rose and let him lead her to the piano. She had hardly hoped that Norman would thus resume old habits and kindnesses here among strangers, and his doing so was so very sweet to Violet's heart as to make it overflow with happiness.

"This is like old times," Norman whispered as they reached the piano. "You used always to sing so much better when

you had not to play also, and I want to hear you, very much."

And as Violet sang with wonderful sweetness, her voice tremulous at times with joy and emotion, Louis Wilmot sat biting his lip in anger as he looked at her and Norman. She had left him without a word, forgetting his existence almost the moment Norman had spoken to her, and Louis Wilmot was not likely to forget the slight or to forgive Norman his success. He had seen his brow clear and the attractive smile that had lighted his grey eyes as Violet replied to his request and rose from her seat. And there was another who sat striving to hide under a calm exterior the storm of passion and jealousy in her heart, and that was Eleanor Gordon. She had condescended to lay aside her pride and exert herself to please this haughty Norman Ashleigh, and he had left her side on the slightest excuse, regardless of her fascinations, to go to Violet, whom, as she felt with bitterness, she could no longer despise, but must hate as a formidable rival.

With a bitter jealousy she saw Norman's glance rest tenderly on Violet as he whispered

those few words at the piano; but yet she would not believe that her own superior beauty, her elegant deportment, all the powers she had put forth to conquer Norman would be lost on him. He could not long remain insensible to the charms which others had admired in vain, and as Eleanor thought of the rich home and possessions of which Norman Ashleigh was master, the unrepressed desire in her heart grew stronger, and she resolved that by no fault of her own should the prize she coveted escape her grasp. Surely this proud, handsome, so attractive Norman Ashleigh could not look on Violet Mortimer with other sentiments than those due to one who was little more than a child whom he had known long and familiarly. If she were wrong, Eleanor told herself, why then—? And Violet went on singing, from her very heart, as it seemed, conscious only of her happiness and Norman's loved presence, dreaming not of the two who had constituted themselves her enemies, and who were each, unknown to the other, brooding over thoughts of as yet powerless hate and revenge.

"How beautifully Violet sings to-night, Nelly!" whispered Louisa Woodford to her

sister. "I have never heard her sing so well before."

"I think it is always easier to sing when one has no accompaniment to manage, and that appears rather a difficult one, I think," said wise little Nelly, believing in her heart that she knew why Violet sang so well; how could she help it, knowing her as she did?

And when her song was finished, Norman led Violet to a seat and remained by her side for nearly all the rest of the evening, both of them unconscious of the two hearts so near them so full of malice and jealousy on their account.

Instinctively Norman and Violet avoided as yet mentioning Mr. Wilmot even by referring to the promise respecting him which had passed between them before Norman's going away. And yet he was not entirely absent from the thoughts of either of them, and each wondered if the other would name him. And when the hour came for them all to say "good-night," it was a very coldly polite one that passed between Norman and Mr. Wilmot, haughty indifference dictating it on the one hand, and smothered hatred and malice on the other.

Feeling as though she trod on air, Violet went arm in arm with Nelly to their room that night, with Norman's "good-night" still in her ears, the tender glance of his eyes and the pressure of his hand still with her. In little mood for sleep was she just then, so the two girls sat together on the bed, talking as was their wont.

"Violet, how very handsome Mr. Ashleigh is! I call him splendid-looking. But, do you know, love, I'm inclined to be frightened at him."

"Oh, Nelly, you don't know him, that is why!"

"Well, I suppose it is; but I don't think I should get so soon to feel at home with him as with other young men we know. I could not fancy ever talking to him as I do to George Lambert, for instance. That grand look of his would freeze me, I'm sure. Were you long before you became used to him, and could call him 'Norman?' "

"He asked me himself to call him 'Norman,' Nelly; I don't think I was very long before I felt at home with him, and you know I was so unused to gentlemen. But he was so kind, I could not feel strange with him long."

“ Ah, well, he took a special fancy to your ladyship, I suppose, and then you see you had no more ordinary individuals to contrast with him, as we have here, and you were so constantly in his company, too. ‘Familiarity breeds——’ well, I won’t say ‘contempt,’ for I daren’t hint such a thing as ‘contempt’ for Mr. Ashleigh, of course. Besides, I really admire him very much, and I could easily imagine some one being madly in love with him, perfectly crazed, and all that sort of thing; but it would not be myself. I should never dream of such a presumptuous thing. Goodness, no ! ” and Nelly pretended to shiver as she laughed merrily, while Violet laughed too to hide her conscious blushes.

“ How very different Norman Ashleigh is to Mr. Wilmot ! ” went on Nelly, in a minute or two. “ Now, I shouldn’t at all mind being married to the latter, for a while, just for the fun of worrying him and giving him something to look melancholy about.”

“ Oh, Nelly ! how wicked you are ! ” and Violet kissed the laughing face of her friend.

“ I suppose that kiss was to show your approval of the way in which I spoke of Mr. Wilmot, eh, Violet ? ”

But Violet grew suddenly thoughtful and silent, until Nelly began to ask her about her life at Ashleigh Court and lead her on to speak of Norman again, and then, in her new happiness, Violet told Nelly more than she had ever done before. She told of the every-day life at Ashleigh Court and its little details, of Norman's constant kindness, of her frequent rides with him, and of his present of the pony (for Nelly had not known before that it was given by him)—she told of his letter to her on her birthday during his absence, heeding not that she was letting out the secret of her love in almost every word, and by the very tenderness of her voice.

Until now Violet had been somewhat reticent and shy in speaking of Norman, and his kindness to herself, even to Nelly; but now her overflowing heart could not be silent, but prompted her to speak of that which was uppermost in it. Violet knew now that she still possessed at least Norman's friendship and tender regard, and this certainty was very sweet to the young heart, making hope whisper, "Is it not perhaps more than that, does he not *perhaps* love me?"

There were moments when Violet could not

believe it, when she dared not think that Norman, who she now saw was thought so attractive and was so looked up to by all, would really lay all his rich gifts at her feet, his proud heart, his noble mind, with its stores of intellect, his manly grace and beauty, in fact his very self and all he had. What had she, a young orphan, until lately, so neglected and despised and lonely, to give him in return? Except, indeed, a life's love and worship, a heart that should be entirely his for the asking—and who was there who could give him more than this, a love, pure, fresh and all devoted? And then hope grew strong as Norman's looks and words and manner rose afresh in her mind. It was something more than kindness and regard Norman had shown to-night, and he was not one ever to act what he did not mean, or to amuse himself by playing with a girl's affections. Violet wondered if he would speak to her on the morrow of Louis Wilmot. Perhaps not, for he might not wish to refer to his past suspicion of him now that they were received on an equality as welcome guests under the same hospitable roof.

CHAPTER II.

MR. WILMOT'S very marked attention to Violet had not escaped Mrs. Woodford's notice, nor could she be ignorant of the fact that they were not encouraged and were very distasteful to the young girl herself. Mrs. Woodford shared Nelly's preference for Violet, and was greatly interested in her, and she felt that if it had been one of her own daughters who was the object of Mr. Wilmot's attention, she certainly should have been anxious to know more of him than she did at present. Major Woodford had more than once remarked to her in private that Mr. Wilmot was singularly uncommunicative about himself; not that the Major entertained any unpleasant suspicion of his guest, but had merely contrasted him with the generality of young men, who were mostly so ready to talk of their past life and experience. But Mrs. Woodford felt that, beyond the knowledge that he was the second cousin of her old friend, Mrs. Lester, they had no other certain information respecting Louis

Wilmot. He had been living abroad for years, during which time the Lesters had lost sight of him, and except that he spoke in a very general way of having resided in different towns of France and Italy, he mentioned nothing of his past history or habits of life, and rarely named persons with whom he had been intimate, or gave one the idea that he had many personal friends. Mrs. Lester had told Mrs. Woodford that he was an only child, and that his father had left him a considerable fortune, and she knew he had scarcely any relations but themselves. His looks caused Mrs. Woodford to think that his life had not been free from dissipation, and in her interest for Violet she watched him somewhat closely, and he impressed her with the idea, as he did so many others, that he possessed a mind ill at ease. She could not exactly repent their politeness in inviting Mr. Wilmot to their house, but her husband and herself had expected a very different person in the young cousin of whom Mrs. Lester had written in such favourable terms. She, kind-hearted and unobservant woman, perceived nothing amiss in her young relative; to her he was perfection, and if she had noticed his behaviour to

Violet, she doubtless never supposed that his preference could be disagreeable to any young girl. It was on the afternoon following his arrival that Norman first mentioned Louis Wilmot's name to Violet. Several of the young people had gone for a walk towards Bowness, and Violet and Nelly were together as usual. They were sauntering slowly through one of the beautiful lanes, so rich in verdure and foliage, which lie about Bowness, along the shores of the lake, when Norman overtook them and walked by Violet's side. The three talked together, until Nelly began to see that Norman was not so formidable and reserved as she had imagined, and accordingly her awe of him partially wore away, and she caused him to laugh heartily at some of her original remarks. Then the thought struck her that Norman and Violet could perhaps dispense with her presence, so on some excuse she left them and ran on gaily to join her brother and some of the others who were in advance.

"You and Miss Nelly have become great friends already, have you not, Violet?" asked Norman, smiling.

"Yes, I think we have. Do you know, I

liked her at once ; she is so kind-hearted, so merry, and so pretty——”

“And so fond of you, Violet, evidently. You have so many friends now, I shall be jealous, Violet,” laughed Norman.

“Oh, you need not, because you are one of the oldest, you know ;” and Violet looked up with a frank smile.

“Thank you, Violet. I must like your friend Nelly, for your sake,” he added in a lower tone, which sent a thrill through Violet’s heart. “She is very amusing and original ; certainly Mr. Wilmot does not appear to be a favourite of hers, by the by, Violet, to judge by her manner of speaking to him ;” and Norman’s eyes were bent rather keenly on Violet’s face, but she bore the scrutiny and replied with a quiet smile,—

“Oh no, she does not like him at all. If you had heard the cruel things she said about him last night, I think you would have been sorry for him, Norman ;” and Violet laughed as she looked up again.

But Norman looked serious enough as he said bitterly,—

“I am afraid whatever she said I should never feel sorry for him.”

Violet did not speak; she saw that unpleasant thoughts were troubling Norman, that he spoke more to himself than to her, and was hardly conscious of what he said. Violet's pride would not let her avow unasked her own present dislike to Mr. Wilmot, even though it would give satisfaction to Norman. She shrank from the idea of letting Norman see that she thought it was still a matter of interest to him whether she liked or disliked Louis Wilmot, and of appearing forward or anxious to show him it was the latter. So there was silence for a minute or two, and then Norman's brow cleared and he turned again to Violet,—

“It is strange, is it not, Violet, that we should be visitors in the same house with this Wilmot, whom I had taken upon myself to ask you to avoid? I ought not to have done so, perhaps; but you knew my motive and forgave me at the time. And yet we know little more of him now, even seeing him daily as we do.”

“He has been abroad again, until he came to the Lesters this time;” then, with slight hesitation, she added gently, “Norman, you know I was not offended when you asked me for that promise. How could I be? why should I care? Why do you think

now that you were wrong? Do not, Norman."

"God bless you, little Violet," said Norman quickly and fervently, as he looked tenderly down on her blushing face; "you have charmed away all my gloom by those kind words, and now I want so much to hear you tell me, if you will, all you have been doing at Ashleigh Court during my absence. You don't know how often I have been with you in thought, riding with you or sitting with you on the shore, and so often, I have fancied myself again with you and my mother in the long winter evenings, once more hearing you sing. I may be selfish, but I shall not be sorry when this visit is over, and we go home once more. But to you the change must be pleasant, the company and gaieties must be so fresh and amusing, and I must endure and like them for your sake."

"Well, Windermere is so very lovely, and I have got so fond of the lake and the scenery, and you know the Woodfords are all so very kind, and I like them so much, especially Nelly, of course, that, you see, I can't help enjoying myself; but Ashleigh Court is *home*, and to go back will be, oh,

so delicious!" she exclaimed, with impulsive ardour. "I could never love any place like Ashleigh Court, except Rose Vale, papa's home, and that would be changed if I were to see it again;" and she sighed, but only for a moment. "Oh, you don't know how busy I have been while you were away. Grandmamma and I took such care of each other, and I worked so hard at my lessons with Miss Lyndsay, that I had not much time for roaming about or riding, or any other idling of that sort;" and she looked up archly at Norman.

Who would have guessed, to look at Violet's bright face, that she was thinking of the days, happily past now, of weary longing and untold loneliness, of the painful doubts and fears of which Norman must not know.

"I declare, Violet, it is well for Miss Lyndsay she has left Ashleigh Court, for she and I would certainly have come to blows on the subject of your ladyship. How often I have been in her bad graces for taking you off those important lessons! I shall quite expect you to exhibit the wisdom of Solomon in future, after all this very hard, close study, little Violet."

It was very sweet to Violet, very strange and yet so natural, to be walking again with Norman like this, to have him talking to her as of old. It seemed like a perfectly happy dream, out of which she never would wish to wake. No wonder that the lake looked still more beautiful, that the air seemed sweeter, and the song of the birds more joyful, with Norman so near. He told her anecdotes of his year in India, all about his aunt and the persons he had met, everything that could interest her, and he listened eagerly to the little home details that she told him in return. And his eyes rested very often and earnestly on the graceful, girlish figure by his side, on the happy face, with its deep, soft eyes, during that long, pleasant walk, which seemed so short, back to the Woodfords' house.

It was on that same evening, when the moon rose clear and beautiful, that a merry party came down to the lake for their promised moonlight expedition. They went in three or four different boats, Violet and Nelly, Harry Woodford and Norman together in one. Eleanor Gordon did not know that these four had pre-arranged to go together,

and so hoped until the last minute that Norman would offer to be her cavalier on the occasion. She was bitterly annoyed to find that he never appeared to think of such a thing, and she was forced to accept of the escort of Louis Wilmot, who perceived that for once it was useless to think of favouring Violet with his society. So those two, with evil thoughts which ill suited with the calm beauty of the night and the surrounding scene, were thrown together, and saw more of each other than they had yet done. For the first time each obtained a real glimpse into the other's character, and the first foundations, scarcely felt as yet, were laid of an unholy understanding between them.

And in another boat, at but little distance, Nelly was chatting merrily to Violet as Norman and Harry rowed them gently across the lake. How peacefully beautiful it all was to Violet as, with Norman so close by, she sat listening to the splash of the oars, the very monotony of which was delicious, and gazing round, across the calm water, at the hill-tops rising so clear and distinct, and at the towering trees and foliage, all bathed in the silvery moonlight!

"How quiet you are, Violet!" exclaimed Nelly; "and here I've been talking to you for the last five minutes!"

"You certainly have had it all to yourself, Nelly," laughed her brother. "Do you think you could manage to keep silence just for a *little* while, and let Miss Mortimer enjoy the scene in quietness? I'm sure she prefers it."

"Not at all, Mr. Woodford," said Violet. "I'm sorry I was so absent, Nelly; I was thinking how lovely everything looks; but I'm quite ready now to talk as much as you like."

"That's a dear! I know it is the proper thing to be silent and romantic on an occasion like this; but, you see, it can hardly be expected from me, as I'm so used to it. But it is charming, isn't it, Violet?"

"Indeed it is," and involuntarily Violet looked at Norman and met his gaze fixed smilingly upon her.

"Violet, suppose you fancy yourself Mary Queen of Scots, and I will be one of your ladies. Mr. Ashleigh and Harry must be our rescuers, and we can imagine ourselves to be escaping from Lochleven. It will make it more interesting."

"And Wray Castle will do for Lochleven Castle. We must fancy it to stand on an island," said Violet.

"Well, I always do think of Queen Mary when we are on the lake at night, Violet, do you know."

"How anxious the poor queen must have been to reach the opposite shore, Nelly, when she saw the lights burning to welcome her! More anxious than we feel to reach the shore again, at least, than I do," and the two girls laughed.

"I am afraid," said Norman, with a smile, "that you are in too merry a mood and do not look half anxious and sorrowful enough to keep up your resemblance to the fugitive queen and her lady."

"It takes a good deal to make *me* look sorrowful, Mr. Ashleigh," said Nelly, somewhat ruefully.

"Quite true," chimed in Harry.

Nelly tossed her pretty head as she looked at her brother.

"It would be a great deal better if you gentlemen would mind your rowing, and leave us ladies alone."

"You ought to remember that it is Queen

Mary and her illustrious attendant you are conducting," said Violet gravely, as her brown eyes glanced merrily from Norman to Harry; "and you should not dare to laugh or make remarks at anything we choose to do."

Then Norman replied, with mock deference,—

"I assure you we are far from being insensible to the honour conferred upon us, and crave your pardon for our misdemeanours."

"We had better not interfere again, Norman, as the ladies are so very high and mighty," said Harry, plying the oars with fresh vigour.

And so the time passed merrily with these four, and it was with regret they touched the shore again, and joined the rest of the party in returning to the house.

As the days passed on, and pleasures, indoor and out, succeeded one another, there took deeper root each hour in Eleanor Gordon's heart a new dislike and bitter jealousy of Violet. For Eleanor, who had never yet loved anyone, knew now that she loved Norman Ashleigh. For her pride's sake, she might have fought against the feeling, but it

was too strong for her, and mastered her completely. She knew she loved him, else why this feeling of joy and relief as she thought of the marriage she had so recently escaped, the breaking off of which had caused her such secret regret and mortification at the time? This worldly, strong-willed girl could hardly believe that she had fallen under the influence of love, she who had ever laughed at its weakness, and who scarcely loved her own fond, doting mother with a real affection. How often had she not told herself that she should look only for a good name, a rich home and establishment, when she married, and now to make the humiliating discovery that her happiness lay in the power of Norman Ashleigh, whom she had resolved to dislike and treat with contemptuous coldness! Her love was selfish, for in a nature like hers it could hardly be otherwise; but it was strong and real, and once she had surrendered herself to its influence, she resolved with all her innate determination that no rival should supplant her with Norman without feeling her resentment. So, with a zeal which Eleanor had never exerted herself before to please anyone, she strove now to gain the heart

of Norman Ashleigh. Proud though she was, she stooped to those petty arts of beguilement of which a nature like Violet's would have been ashamed. If Eleanor's passion had been returned, if Norman had not been so insensible to her charms, it might have been the means of softening her heart and bringing out whatever latent good there was in her character; but as it was, her ill-educated mind could not brook the disappointment of finding that, not only was Norman insensible to her beauty, but he seemed hardly conscious of her endeavours to gain his attentions. He was strictly polite to her, for Norman was a gentleman, and was never deficient in the customary attention to those of the other sex with whom he chanced to be thrown into contact; but it was this very indifference, polite as it was, that was bitter to Eleanor's spirit. If Norman had shown dislike she could have borne it better, but to see that, when she stooped from her haughtiness, her efforts were wasted and he passed her by with coldness and unconsciousness, showing that he simply never thought of her at all one way or the other, was fearfully galling. And Norman *could* be so tender, so devoted, she

knew, for her jealous eyes watched every look, every word of his to Violet, and she saw how without any effort on the part of the latter Norman was constantly at her side, caring not to hide with what sentiments he regarded her. Eleanor could no longer doubt it, Violet was her rival, Violet, whom she hated, and had once so despised, and she had not the consolation of being able to think that it was from any other motive than true, devoted attachment that Norman sought the young girl whose home was under his roof. She read Norman's noble character too well for her own peace to be able even to hope that any unworthy motive influenced him in his choice of Violet. Very different was the judgment she had by this time formed of Louis Wilmot, her dislike of whom was increased by the fact that she felt partly in his power, for she had discovered that he was not ignorant of her secret. She had been unable to hide some confusion on one occasion when their eyes met, and she saw he had been watching her gazing intently at Norman and Violet as they sat together. A malicious smile passed over his face, and he had contrived to utter a few significant words, hinting

that they had a common grievance (for he tried to conceal from no one his pursuit of Violet), and thus, abhor it as she might, there was a link established between herself and Louis Wilmot, which, in natures such as theirs, could lead to no good result.

There was at this time, especially as the days went on, a shyness and reserve in Violet's manner to Norman which she had not shown in the days before his going away. She felt that it should be so, especially here before strangers, and she was no longer a child, or even a school-girl, who might talk carelessly as such to Norman. She was a woman now, however sadly she felt the change. In the first joy at Norman's return Violet had not thought of this; but now the very consciousness of her love made it, to her sensitive, delicate nature, necessary to be less free than heretofore with him. He was unchanged, it was true, he was even more tender than of old; but this might only mean the natural renewal of their friendship, and perhaps Norman never dreamt of love. So there was a womanly dignity and reserve, and, at times, an almost shrinking shyness and backwardness in Violet's manner which

troubled Norman, and which he more than once resented by a change and coldness, imperceptible perhaps to others, but only too evident to Violet, who shed tears in secret at the change from the old happy days and for what might be the beginning of an estrangement between her and Norman. But there were times too when Norman laid pride aside, and did not rest until he had dispelled the temporary cloud between himself and Violet, leading her on until, forgetting everything but the present moment, she yielded to her happiness and talked to him with all her old confidence and earnestness, her joyous smiles rewarding him well for his efforts to break down the barrier which, in her proud sensitiveness, she had been fast raising between them. It was in moments like these, of unrestrained converse with Norman, unconscious of the jealous eyes of Eleanor Gordon, which were so often riveted on them, that her whole happiness consisted at this time.

And Mrs. Ashleigh, with an unwhispered hope in her heart, never felt so happy as when she saw together those two so dear to her, her son and the young girl she had

taken to her heart as a daughter. Nelly Woodford's kind heart prevented her from speaking much or particularly of Norman to Violet when they were alone, seeing that it embarrassed her slightly, however much she strove against it. Nelly was not ignorant of the state of affairs, and took the liveliest interest in the least thing concerning Violet's happiness. It was her own opinion, as she often told herself, that no one with eyes could help seeing that Norman Ashleigh was over head and ears in love with Violet. She never complained that she had less of Violet's conversation now, though in fact it was so, for even at nights Violet loved more than ever to sit long at the window gazing out, lost in thought. Kind, shrewd little Nelly would not notice the blush with which Violet would wake from her silent reverie, remembering her friend's presence, which, for the time, she had forgotten. Once indeed, when Nelly and her brother were walking together in the garden, and Norman and Violet were some yards in advance of them, Nelly said carelessly, as if in jest,—

“Harry, I wish you'd fall in love with Violet. She is just the one I'd like for you ;

and she would be my own sister then, and I should always be sure of seeing as much of her as I liked."

"I am afraid, Nell, my love would be thrown away upon Miss Mortimer, and someone else would not be much obliged to me," and Harry smiled as he looked involuntarily at the figures of Norman and Violet before them. "I will promise always to like her very much, if that will do."

And then Nelly knew that Harry also guessed what she herself did.

Meanwhile, in spite of Norman's presence, Louis Wilmot still, whenever he could, forced his unwelcome attentions upon Violet. He would not be repelled or offended, not yet at least; it was as though he would not relinquish his chance, poor as it was, of winning her, without a struggle. He took a pleasure in seeing Norman's ill-concealed indignation and impatience, when, in his presence, he was markedly polite to Violet or monopolized her conversation so as for the time she could not escape him. It was terribly hard for Norman to hide his contempt for Louis Wilmot, and to preserve the necessary civility towards him of one gentleman to another.

Sometimes, when watching him talk to Violet, with his languishing manner and fascinating smile, his evil spirit suggested to him that Violet was not sufficiently cold and distant to discourage Mr. Wilmot and to be in keeping with the dislike she had once acknowledged to for him, and which he, Norman, had always believed her to entertain. It was Norman's failing, that of being unreasonable and exacting when pride gained the mastery over him, and his idea in this instance was helped on by the thought of Violet's occasional reserve towards himself, forgetting that her gentle behaviour to Louis Wilmot was only what was required from any lady, and was consistent with Violet's generous, forgiving character. And how was she to know that it was with any other than the highest and most honourable motives that Louis Wilmot sought her? This Norman told himself in his calmer moments, when he felt the unreasonableness of his suspicion, and remembered too that he had no right to interfere between Violet and Mr. Wilmot. And then, in his keen repentance for his injustice, Norman's manner became so tender, so full of the old kindness to her as to call up the

happy blushes to her cheeks, and her ill-concealed joy at these times ought to have convinced Norman once for all and have prevented him from ever again, by coldness and implied doubt, torturing the sensitive, loving heart. How often did Norman long with a restless desire for the day that would end their visit here at Windermere, and see them, his mother, Violet, and himself, again at home at Ashleigh Court.

CHAPTER III.

It came to the day before that on which the Woodfords' ball was to take place, and Nelly was in a delightful state of excitement at the prospect of it, and kept telling Violet that she must be determined to enjoy herself at this her first ball.

"It won't be my fault if you don't, for I'm going to look well after you," she said,—

"Don't neglect yourself, though, Nelly," suggested Violet.

"Oh, never fear but that I shall take care of myself too, very well indeed," was the merry response.

During the last day or two Violet had perceived and foiled more than one attempt of Mr. Wilmot's to speak to her alone. He had hastened eagerly to her side if she sat apart or a few minutes or walked alone out of doors, and though he had striven hard to detain her, she had escaped from him as

politely but as soon as she could. Something in his manner made her guess what was his object, and she wished if possible to prevent him making the declaration which he evidently intended. On this day most of the company were going for a ramble among the pleasant lanes and fields at Ambleside, and had either paired off in couples or formed parties of three and four as they set out. Nelly, thinking that Norman Ashleigh would wish to have Violet's company alone, went off with some others without asking Violet to accompany them. Violet herself had hoped that Norman would ask her to go with him, and her heart had thrilled, as it always did, at the prospect of the long, pleasant walk with him, for nothing now was so like the old familiar, happy days. But they were nearly all gone, and still Norman never came for her, and Violet began to think he could not intend going at all. She knew he had not gone, for she sat on one of the garden seats and had seen the rest all pass out. She rose now to go and join them, for she blushed as pride suggested that Norman might think she was waiting for him if he came out and saw her sitting there, when suddenly she heard Louis Wilmot's voice

pronouncing her name, and looking round, she saw him close behind her,—

“Miss Mortimer, this is a pleasure, to find you not gone! You cannot mean to remain here alone? Mrs. Lester and I are going to follow the rest; surely we may have the pleasure of your company?”

It would have been rudeness and affectation to refuse, when Mrs. Lester was going too, and again Violet thought that Norman might wonder if he found she had remained. It was more this thought than any other that made Violet reply at once that she would go, and with a pleased smile Mr. Wilmot rejoined,—

“I will go and hasten my good cousin, she will be delighted to have you for a companion, Miss Mortimer.”

He re-entered the house, leaving Violet waiting in the garden. Scarcely a minute elapsed when Norman Ashleigh came out, and Violet started slightly as he came towards her.

“Hah! I am so glad you are not gone, Violet. I should have come out sooner, but I could not get away from Major Woodford, and I have been looking for you in the drawing-room and library. You will come

with me, will you not? If you do not mind, we will take a different way from the rest, for I like to anticipate the quiet rambles with you at Ashleigh Court," and Norman's eyes were bent tenderly on Violet, as he made a step forwards.

But Violet stood still, with a wild longing to go with him, in spite of her pre-engagement; it was no easy task to have to tell Norman that her company was promised to Louis Wilmot. But she forced herself to say bravely, but quietly,—

"I am very sorry, Norman, I should like to have gone; but Mr. Wilmot has just asked me to go with him and Mrs. Lester, and I have promised him."

"And you must refuse me because you have promised Louis Wilmot?" asked Norman quickly, in a low voice, for the very name of Mr. Wilmot irritated him and brought back his mad unreasonableness.

"He asked me first, and I cannot tell him now I will not go with them;" and the very emotion excited by Norman's tone made Violet speak with a shade of pride.

She could not help it, but if she could have done, it would have been well. Perhaps if she

could have seen into Norman's heart, and the idea that was troubling him, she would have yielded, and not have so proudly concealed her emotion; but as it was, how could Norman guess the thought that was in her heart just then, "Oh! if I had only not been here when Mr. Wilmot came out!"

And the reserve of Violet's manner was fast raising a storm of suspicion within him. Hardly knowing what he said, he turned on Violet with a sudden sternness and with a bitter curl of his haughty lip,—

"Is Mr. Wilmot's company so very pleasant, then? Perhaps you wish to retract the professions of dislike for him you once made, foolishly, as you now doubtless think?"

Norman's anger forced the words from him; but it was more than Violet could bear any longer. That Norman should speak like this, and in this bitter tone, when her heart, so long his, was lamenting only that she had to refuse his welcome request, was too much! All the pride of her nature was roused as she exclaimed passionately,—

"You have no right to say such a thing to me, Norman! Have I no pride or feeling? Do you think I am a child, and do not know

how to act rightly or without being interfered with and dictated to ? ”

For a moment Norman looked at Violet's troubled face and saw the proud tears standing in her eyes. He was very pale, and there was more of determination, and yet sorrow, too, than of his previous anger in his voice as he said, slowly and bitterly,—

“ Pardon me, I ought to have remembered this before, that you are no longer a child, but a young lady, like the rest of them. Rest assured that henceforth you need fear no interference from me, even the slightest, in anything that concerns you, nor any dictation either, as you choose to term it. This you may rely upon.”

For one moment she glanced at him, and as he turned from her, she saw that the stern expression of Rupert Ashleigh's portrait was terribly distinct on his face. He left her, and turned down the road opposite to that which the rest had gone. It had all passed so quickly that Violet hardly realized it until Norman was gone, and she remained standing alone, feeling as though she were turned to stone. One only thought possessed her, wringing her very heart, “ I have alienated him for ever ! ”

All her pride and anger were gone; she could almost have followed Norman and asked him to forgive her; she forgot that he had been unjust, unreasonable, that her wounded pride had been provoked by his words and manner; she remembered only that she had for the first time in her life spoken with passionate resentment to Norman, uttering mad words, when she might have soothed his irritation by a gentle, dignified answer.

She had offended him deeply, and she knew his proud nature so well, that she felt how perfectly he would act up to the bitter promise contained in those parting words, which had sunk so cruelly and deeply into her heart, sounding the knell of the past familiar friendship, of the old happy days of mutual confidence and trust.

Mrs. Lester and Louis Wilmot came out as she was standing thus, listlessly gazing out straight before her, and on seeing them she remembered that she must go with them now, when she so longed to be alone. She recoiled afresh from Mr. Wilmot, the cause of her present unhappiness, and she exerted herself by a terrible effort to talk to Mrs. Lester. As they left the garden Violet almost

involuntarily glanced down the road Norman had taken, and she saw his tall figure already far in the distance. They turned in the opposite direction, and Mrs. Lester said to Violet,—

“I thought we should have had Mr. Ashleigh’s company also, my dear, for I saw him a few moments ago as he left the house. I daresay you saw him too, as he must have passed you in the garden.”

“He has gone the other way, Mrs. Lester,” said Violet, hiding her blush from Mrs. Lester, but not from Louis Wilmot.

“Mr. Ashleigh must be getting fond of solitary walks,” he said, stealing a glance at Violet’s face, but she said nothing.

They walked on, Mrs. Lester somehow having most of the conversation to keep up, until, seeing Mrs. Woodford and another elderly lady a little distance off, she said, smiling,—

“I daresay you young people can amuse each other whilst I join Mrs. Woodford and Mrs. Reed. They will turn back soon, I daresay, and as we elderly folk cannot walk so well as you young ones, I will do the same;” and she walked on, leaving Violet

and Louis Wilmot alone, little guessing how Violet wished to detain her, as she thus unwittingly gave her cousin the chance he had been wishing for.

Mr. Wilmot continued still talking on indifferent subjects ; but Violet knew what was coming, though she felt strangely passive, hardly caring to prevent it any longer. Perhaps if he was determined to speak, it would be best to let him do so, and then, having given him her answer, she would be finally freed from his pursuit of her. Violet's thoughts were so entirely filled with what had passed between herself and Norman that she felt indifferent to any other trouble or embarrassment.

They were in the fields now, and could see in the distance several of their party walking slowly or sitting down among the clumps of trees which form such shady retreats scattered about the fields at Ambleside. Mrs. Lester and her companion were some yards in advance, and were hidden by one of these clumps from the sight of Violet and Mr. Wilmot. There was no one near, and suddenly Mr. Wilmot stopped, and, facing Violet, he seized her hand, with a feverish eagerness in

his tone as he uttered protestations of love to her, telling her she could not have doubted his feelings even from the first, and that he had ventured to hope for her love in return, and he begged her to bless him by promising to be his wife.

Violet was surprised to find how calmly she listened to his eloquent appeal, how little it moved her, for even as he spoke, her thoughts wandered again to her new trouble, the thought of what had passed between her and Norman, hardly realized as yet. Gently but firmly she withdrew the hand Mr. Wilmot had taken, and then a feeling of sorrow for him, if he really loved her as he said, came over her, much as she disliked and recoiled from him. She was very young and inexperienced, and felt it very strange to be here, amidst such new scenes, receiving such a declaration as the present one. As gently and kindly as she could, she must tell Mr. Wilmot that his hope was useless, that she did not, could not love him. With Norman's recent stern words and her love for him wringing her heart, she shrank from giving similar pain to another.

“ Mr. Wilmot, I am sorry you have indulged

hope, for it cannot be; I can never be your wife."

"That answer cannot be final, Miss Mortimer, it must not be," entreated Louis Wilmot, with persistence. "I can wait, I can hope still that you will yet learn to love me, that you will consider what I have said. I will not hurry you, I will not press immediately for an answer; but do not drive me to despair by telling me that you can *never* be my wife."

"It is useless to say all this, Mr. Wilmot. If you waited for years, my answer would still be the same. Do not distress yourself or me further. I thank you for the honour you do me, but what you ask can *never* be;" and Violet spoke very firmly now.

"Then you tell me you will not even *try* to love; perhaps you have even learnt to hate me;" and Mr. Wilmot's eyes flashed fiercely on Violet, who met his gaze steadily.

"You cannot suppose that I hate you because I do not, *never* can love you, Mr. Wilmot. And I do not think I have done *anything* to lead you to think I wished to encourage your intentions. Take my final answer now, but I do not want to part in anger;" and as she

moved from his side, she gently offered him her hand, but he would not take it; he lowered his voice as he said with a malignant glance,—

“It is for another you have refused me; do not think I do not know who has taught you to hate me, to repay my devotedness with contempt; but I will not be defeated by him, or I will be revenged.”

Violet was roused now, and her eyes flashed proudly,—

“I do not think I have deserved insult from you, Mr. Wilmot. How can you say such a thing to me?”

But Mr. Wilmot, laying aside his usual politeness, turned from Violet and walked slowly away from her without a word. A hope crossed Violet's mind that he would not meet Norman on his way home, for what might he not say to him in his present state of vehement disappointment? With the indignant flush still dyeing her cheeks, she walked on to join the group she saw at some distance. But for a dread of meeting Norman she would have returned to the house, to the privacy of her bedroom, for the crowd of emotions in her heart was almost too much for her. When she neared the group, Nelly

was sitting on the grass with two or three young men around her, and Miss Woodford was walking about with her inseparable Eleanor Gordon at some little distance. On seeing Violet, Nelly started up.

"Why, Violet! you unprotected female! what are you doing all alone? I wish I'd made you come with us, after all. Where's Mr. Ashleigh?" she asked, rather thoughtlessly, so many being present.

"He has not come this way at all, Nelly. I came out with Mrs. Lester and Mr. Wilmot."

"Humph!" exclaimed Nelly, "then Mr. Ashleigh remained indoors?"

"No, he went for a walk the other way," replied Violet, with an effort to be careless.

"Dear me! his highness preferred solitary grandeur to the company of happy, ordinary people like us," and Nelly looked laughingly at her companions. "Well, it is a shame of him, and I shall tell him so at dinner-time, if I can get my courage up to the point. And where's Mr. Wilmot?"

"Gone back, I think, and so are your mamma and Mrs. Lester," replied Violet, evasively.

“Well, we must do without them, I suppose, and I am glad to have your company on the way back;” and linking her arm in Violet’s, Nelly drew her to where she had been sitting, and they sat down again for a while longer.

As they walked home, Nelly’s merry chatter failed to rouse Violet from her absent reverie. There was a wild desire in her heart to be alone and weep out her sorrow; but she had to deny herself the indulgence, for it was time to dress when they reached the house. During the time she was dressing, Violet felt a strange dread at the thought of having to see Norman so soon. How would he meet her—would their estrangement be indeed final after what had passed? How easy now in her unhappiness would it be to lay pride aside and ask Norman to forgive her; but how could she do it? She must not make the first advance; she was nothing to Norman, who now, more than ever, in his offended pride, would hold aloof from her, hardly wishing for a reconciliation perhaps. In her generous regret, Violet scarcely remembered the provocation she had received, she only thought of Norman’s long kindness, and their past friendship, ended now by her

own act. His words and suspicion had been terribly hard to bear; but she might have turned aside his irritation by gentleness, knowing so well his haughty nature, and she had not done so!

The sensitive heart, with its long hidden love stronger than ever, beat fast as Norman entered the drawing-room. Violet was near the door, and he saw her; but passing her politely and coldly, he happened to sit down by Eleanor Gordon, who felt triumphant, believing him to be attracted by her charms. He talked to her, finding himself so near her, and as Violet saw them, a cruel pang smote her heart. Norman grew apparently interested in his conversation with Eleanor, and as he smiled frequently and as though nothing were troubling him, the natural conviction forced itself upon Violet, "He wishes me to see that he is indifferent to me, that in future it is to be as he said!"

Then injured pride came to the rescue, and though her heart felt half breaking, Violet turned to Harry Woodford, who sat next her, and began suddenly to talk to him with an interest and animation which delighted Harry, for he and Violet were very good friends. At

least she could hide her grief from Norman ; he would not care for it, and he should never know it. But though she talked to Harry, her eyes wandered now and then to Norman and Eleanor.

“ Norman cannot but see how handsome she is,” was her thought as she saw him smile at some remark of Eleanor’s.

Eleanor’s cold, statuesque face was rarely animated, but once love, selfish though it was, had aroused the hitherto unfeeling heart, she had exerted unusual efforts to fascinate Norman, and this evening, triumphant at what seemed his attention, she looked indeed beautiful, as pleasure lent for the time to her eyes a nearer approach to the soft expression which they lacked than Violet had ever seen.

Just then Nelly went up to Norman with a smile,—

“ Mr. Ashleigh, will you let me scold you ? ”

Norman smiled at the pretty face with its laughing blue eyes.

“ Certainly, Miss Nelly, if you wish, but I am sorry to have deserved it ; what have I done ? ”

“ Well, you know we had all arranged to go

out together this afternoon, and you broke your promise and never came near us."

Involuntarily Norman looked across at Violet. Did her wistful eyes reproach him as he met their gaze? was it that that made the smile leave his face and a troubled expression cloud it for a moment? Violet looked away, blushing to think that he had found her looking at him so sadly, and addressed some laughing remark to Harry Woodford. Norman watched her with a peculiar smile, half-scornful, half-sad, and then turned to Nelly, who, having her back to Violet, did not see what had passed. But Eleanor did, and, with secret satisfaction, divined that something was amiss.

"If I acknowledge that I was wrong and will not offend again, will you forgive me?" asked Norman of Nelly, with a smile.

"Well, I must, I think, after such an humble apology," she replied, gaily, as she left him, wondering a little, perhaps, why he gave no reason for his remissness, but quite unconscious of what a delicate matter she had touched upon to him, or she would have been dismayed.

Louis Wilmot seemed to have overcome his

anger of the afternoon, to Violet's surprise, for though he did not force himself on her as he had been accustomed to do, yet the few times he spoke to her during the evening he was polite and gentlemanly, as though to make amends for his previous rudeness, and Violet felt grateful to him for not seeking her company in her preoccupation. His proposal should of course remain a secret, if it depended on her. "Except to grandmamma," she told herself; "when we are back at Ashleigh Court, I will tell her, for I know she has felt uneasy about him." Little did Violet ever keep from her dear guardian, except indeed the one secret she could not tell her.

During the evening Nelly carried Violet off with her to see the preparations which had been made in the room in which they were to dance next evening, and there began to execute an *impromptu* dance by herself on the spacious floor.

"I hope to-morrow evening will be like this, not too hot, don't you, Violet? Do you know, I'm engaged for half a dozen dances already; but it is too bad, I won't promise any more to the gentlemen staying in the house.

I must save some for the others, you know. I wish I were as graceful as you, love," and Nelly looked with a comic wistfulness at Violet, which made the latter laugh, though she had to repress a sigh almost at the same moment. She had been looking forward with such interest and pleasure to her first ball, and now how could it give her pleasure—would it not afford her only embarrassment and pain?

Norman had not once spoken to her since the afternoon, even indifferently. Certainly he had never chanced to be near her, but he had made no attempt to be; he had almost studiously avoided her. Oh! surely this could not last; Norman was too generous to cherish offence very long! When they should be at Ashleigh Court again, he would not refuse his friendship to her, if only for the sake of the past! But what was friendship, when she knew, as she thought, that Norman cared not for her?

And yet, why his dislike of and anger against Louis Wilmot, why his suspicion of to-day? There was a strange confusion of hope and bewilderment and pain in Violet's heart as she re-entered the drawing-room with

Nelly. She had scarcely sat down when Mrs. Woodford came up to her.

“I want you to give us a song, Violet. If I ask Norman Ashleigh to play it for you, will you sing the one you sang the night he arrived? You have never given it us since, and it is a beautiful thing, and Norman plays the accompaniment so beautifully too; you don't mind sharing the praise, do you, love?”

“Do sing it, Violet,” joined in Mrs. Ashleigh, who sat near. Violet had no time to answer before Mrs. Woodford went to Norman and made her request. Violet saw the faintest colour rise to his pale face, but he replied at once,—

“Certainly, with pleasure, Mrs. Woodford, if she is willing,” and he looked enquiringly but with perfect calmness at Violet, who could say nothing, but moved silently towards the piano, followed by Norman, who found the song for her without a word and sat down and began to play. Violet would have given worlds to escape this ordeal; she feared that she would break down before all this company, that she could never master her emotion; but once she began to sing, pride sustained her,

and she went through it bravely to the end. But there was a sad, thrilling sweetness in her voice to-night, something which seemed to go straight to Norman's heart with each note. Why did she sing with such strange pathos? was she reproaching him for those cold, cruel words he had spoken this afternoon? He could have taken her in his arms and asked her to forgive him, there and then, as she stood by him, in the yearning of his heart, though she knew it not. But her song was ended now, and she thanked him in one word, and would have put away the song, but he gently prevented her, and did so for her. And yet the pride of both their natures separated them still, and Norman, when he had led Violet to a seat, left her and went to a different part of the room. Another time he would never have left her, without a few minutes at least of conversation, after an occasion which always brought so vividly to mind the past days at Ashleigh Court and the hope of their speedy renewal. Violet sat quietly for a moment or two after Norman had left her. Was it to be thus, then? Outwardly, to others to seem the same, and to her this cold politeness, when she was long-

ing for the tender glance, the kind, attentive manner that she knew so well, that she had been so used to. In three days they were to return to Ashleigh Court, and how would it be then? If now that she was grown up, her presence under his roof should be no longer even not unpleasant to Norman, if she found that she was a bar to his full enjoyment of his mother's society, she could not stay there, she must go back to her step-mother and Eleanor, to the old London life, unloved and dreary always, but which would be worse now, oh! a hundred times!

The pent up emotion must give way at last, and quietly leaving the room, Violet went quickly upstairs, and when safe within the bedroom she shared with Nelly, she knelt down by the bed and, burying her face, cried as if her heart would break, as she had done that night when Norman was going away, after she bade him adieu, only the tears were far more bitter now. The strength that had upheld her while she sang was all gone. It had ever been thus with Violet since her father died, all during her lonely, Cinderella-like existence in London, when she had no friend to whom to tell her childish

sorrows, and so had learnt to bear pain bravely, without a sign before others. In secret and alone was her grief indulged, as now, when the kind tears relieved her throbbing heart. How little, in the days of Norman's absence, or during the long nights she had lain awake fearing some danger might befall him, or when she had rejoiced as his return grew near, had Violet thought it would all come to this coldness and estrangement between them! Ah! how different was the reality from what she had so fondly imagined! How long she might have knelt there cannot be said, had not Nelly, who had noticed her leaving the room, wondering at her continued absence, determined to go to her, fearing she was ill. On entering the bedroom, which was lighted only by the moon, which shone on Violet's light silk dress as it swept the floor, Nelly saw her at once, and going to her, she put her arm round her caressingly,—

“Violet, darling, are you ill? Do tell me.”

Violet raised her head and, dashing away the tears from her face, she tried to smile.

“No, no, I am quite well, Nelly; do not mind me; I am all right now. You should

not have left the drawing-room for me, love."

"But won't you tell me what is the matter? Something must have made you unhappy, and I'm *so* sorry. *I* have not vexed you, have I?"

"No, indeed, Nelly," warmly replied Violet, whose face was covered with blushes at being discovered. "It is nothing, really; I was only foolish, and, you see, I am quite right again now."

"Indeed I hope so, for you don't know how wretched I should be if anything made you unhappy in our house."

And Nelly would not press for what she saw must be a secret.

"What a baby you'll think me, Nelly! But it does me good to cry sometimes for nothing, I think," and Violet tried to laugh as she bathed her eyes to hide the tear traces.

"There, you look better now, darling!" and Nelly gave her an affectionate kiss; "it would not do to spoil your beauty for to-morrow night. Now, are you sure you're all right again?" asked Nelly, very earnestly, concerned and wondering secretly, though

she would not distress Violet again by asking what had caused her such trouble.

"Yes, indeed, Nelly," and Violet really did feel relieved by her tears. "It was nothing. You will not name it to anyone?" she asked, with slight confusion.

"How could you think I should, Violet, dear? You must forgive me for intruding on you, but indeed I was afraid you were ill."

During the remainder of the evening the same coldness was maintained by Norman and Violet. The latter was standing by Mrs. Ashleigh when Norman came to bid his mother "good-night" as usual, before they broke up for the night. Then he turned to Violet. "Good-night, Violet," he said, in a low, quiet voice, and they shook hands; but she could not look up, and turned away as soon as possible, and this action, which looked like intended coldness, wounded Norman's pride afresh, and with compressed lips he turned away too and noticed her no further. His mother perceived that he looked somewhat stern and troubled, and she fancied that he and Violet were briefer with each other than usual; but she supposed it was but an accident, and dismissed her misgiving from her mind.

CHAPTER IV.

It was the same the next day, the same estrangement and cold politeness between Norman and Violet, pride interfering to prevent any advance which, in the yearning of their hearts, either might have made. Violet's act of the previous evening, simple as it was, had naturally increased Norman's haughty reserve. He could not know that she had turned from him to hide her emotion as her hand rested in his.

Nelly was miserable ; for having been a witness of Violet's passionate weeping the night before, she could not but connect it with the altered behaviour between her and Norman, and the estrangement was visible in a thousand little ways, even in the very tones of their voices when they had to address each other, to one so interested as Nelly in at least one of the parties concerned. To-day, among so large a company, and the excitement of preparation for the evening, the change

was not likely to attract general attention, and as yet Mrs. Ashleigh had not remarked it, or she would have been deeply grieved and puzzled as to the cause of a misunderstanding between Violet and her son, so early, too, in the days of his return. Louis Wilmot and Eleanor Gordon, who had each their own cause for being interested in the case, were the only ones who, besides Nelly, secretly suspected, as they narrowly watched Norman and Violet, that something unpleasant had occurred between them. Eleanor was hardly able to conceal her triumph from Violet, and thinking that a chance like this could not but be favourable to herself, she was even more lavish than ever of her smiles and gracious manner to Norman, and as he seemed to repay her with attention, and appeared interested in her conversation, she did not see that he was not thinking of her, but was acting thus to conceal from Violet what he was really feeling. To her chagrin, Eleanor could never detect any tenderness, nothing but ordinary politeness in his manner towards her. But she was not discouraged, hoping that Norman might yet be fascinated by her beauty.

“If Violet is really my rival,” she often

said to herself, "there is one consolation for me, that Norman Ashleigh fancies her because he has known her so long. If he had met me first, he could never have thought of her at all; even now he may yet forget her for me."

To Violet's surprise and relief, Louis Wilmot did not attempt to renew his attentions, but behaved exactly towards her as to her young companions, as though he cherished no anger or resentment for her refusal of him, as he had given her to suppose he would, and consequently she began to entertain a more favourable opinion of him than she had previously done.

Early during the afternoon, Violet sat in the drawing-room with Mrs. Ashleigh and Mrs. Woodford. Most of the others were out in the garden, but she had stayed indoors, not caring to accompany them. She felt weary and wishful to be quiet, for she had kept up a constant strain to appear cheerful and not to disappoint Nelly by letting her see that the thought of the ball no longer gave her any pleasure.

As they were sitting, Norman came into the room. He had evidently not expected

to find Violet here ; but turning to his mother and Mrs. Woodford, he asked if they felt inclined to accompany him, as he was going to the rest in the garden.

“ Well, you see, we old people are resting in preparation for the exertions of this evening, Norman, when we shall have to look after you young ones,” said Mrs. Woodford, laughing, “ and we do not intend going out this afternoon. But they are playing *crôquet*, and I am sure they will be glad if you go and join them, Norman ;” then turning to Violet, she added, “ You ought to go also, my love.”

“ Yes, take her with you, Norman,” said his mother. Norman turned to Violet.

“ Will you come ?” he asked gently, but briefly.

Oh ! how Violet longed to say yes, how she longed to go with him and, if she could not revert openly to their misunderstanding by asking him to forgive her, at least show him by her manner that she was sorry for what she had said ; but for her very life she could not. She fancied he asked her only because he was forced to do so before his mother and Mrs. Woodford, that he did not

really wish her to go with him, and that it might look like forcing herself upon him if she went. So the moment of grace again passed, and without looking at Norman, she replied as carelessly as she could,—

“I think I would rather stay in this afternoon, thank you ;” but the effort was almost too much, and her lips quivered slightly, and Norman saw it. He said nothing, but left the room at once, and directly afterwards they saw him from the window going towards the crôquet ground to join the rest.

Again Mrs. Ashleigh could not but think that he and Violet had been somewhat cool with each other, and for the first time had real misgivings as to whether anything unpleasant could have occurred between them, though as yet she would not think of interfering by questioning either of them. In a short time she and Mrs. Woodford left the room, Violet remaining alone, with a book in her hand, which, however, she was not even trying to read, and which at last slipped unnoticed from her knee as she grew more and more absorbed in her painful thoughts, and the burning tears

would have burst forth again, but she dashed them back impatiently and quickly.

Meanwhile, as Norman approached the crôquet ground, Miss Woodford came towards him.

"You will play, won't you, Mr. Ashleigh? We want one to make our number complete, so you must not refuse."

"I am at your service, Miss Woodford," replied Norman, as he took the mallet she gave him; "on which side am I to play?"

"You are to be my enemy," she laughed; "but Miss Gordon and Nelly and the others there are your friends."

Eleanor was delighted to have Norman on her side, and she kept him fully employed talking to her, whether he would or not, and in directing her moves. If she had looked often at Louis Wilmot, who was on the opposite side, she would have seen that he was amusing himself with watching her with an occasional smile of contempt on his lips. Nelly's thoughts kept wandering to Violet, and her tender heart fretted at her inability to help her in the trouble which she now felt certain had arisen between her and Norman Ashleigh.

"I always thought he was a haughty individual, and I am sure it is his fault, whatever has happened. And I was beginning to like him so much! If each is not as perfectly in love with the other as ever mortals were, I am very much mistaken, and yet this stupid quarrel, or whatever it is—oh dear!"

Then suddenly an idea struck Nelly, and though Violet might not have approved of it, she determined to act on it without giving herself time to consider.

"All is fair in love and war, they say," she said to herself. "Oh, thank goodness, Eleanor Gordon has left him alone a minute;" and Nelly went to where Norman stood a little apart.

"Did you see Violet anywhere before you came out, Mr. Ashleigh? I could not persuade her to come. Do you know," and even Nelly hesitated a moment at her own boldness, "I am afraid, though she says nothing, that she is not well. I can tell when she is only trying to be cheerful, and, somehow, she does not seem likely to enjoy herself to-night, and I had set my heart on her doing so, at her first ball, you know."

“Why do you think all this, Miss Nelly?” asked Norman eagerly, as he fixed his eyes earnestly upon her face.

“Oh, not from anything she says, of course, Mr. Ashleigh; but what do you think? Last night I went upstairs and found her all alone in the dark, crying as if her heart would break! I don’t think she would cry for nothing, though she says she does sometimes, so I felt sure something was the matter with her; but she persisted it was nothing, and—oh dear! I promised not to say anything about it, and here I’ve talked myself into telling you; but don’t think anything of it, please, for she said I wasn’t to, so it must be only my fancy, after all;” and Nelly looked up so innocently now that no one could have suspected her of knowing more than she pretended.

“I hope so, Miss Nelly, and I will not betray you,” said Norman kindly; but he half turned away, with an expression of pain stamped on his countenance.

Then there was silence, and Nelly began to feel uncomfortable, wondering whether she had done right. But she felt glad that she had spoken, and would not regret it.

“Nelly, are you in a dream? It is your turn to play,” called out her brother, laughingly; and Nelly, not sorry at this escape from her *tête-à-tête* with Norman, ran forward a few steps, and was soon engaged in the game again. Norman remained standing where Nelly left him, in deep thought for a minute or two, then throwing down the mallet he held, he walked away from the ground, merely saying to Harry as he passed,—

“You must excuse me playing any more to-day,” and went towards the house.

Harry looked after him with some curiosity, for his manner had been absent as he spoke those few words. “What does his lordship mean by going off like that!” he thought to himself, and then said aloud to Miss Woodford,—

“Loo, Norman Ashleigh has deserted us, so you must persuade Mrs. Reed there to come and take his place.”

And Nelly tried to look unconscious and easy, but she felt a little anxious and excited. Had her words taken effect, as she had hoped?

And the game had lost its zest for Eleanor,

too, since Norman's abrupt departure. She was indignant that her efforts to fascinate him had failed so completely, that he had gone without a word even of excuse to her.

With a terrible emotion piercing his proud heart, Norman entered the house and made his way to the library, where he had left Violet. She might not be alone, but even before his mother and Mrs. Woodford he could manage to make her see he wished to speak to her, in a way she could not refuse, for speak to her he must. Since he had detected her emotion, even as she refused to come out with him, he had resolved to find an opportunity of speaking to her in the evening at least, if he could not before, and Nelly's kind manœuvre had only hastened his intention. Nelly had acted her part so well that, happily for his own pride, Norman had not the least idea she had spoken with a purpose. Violet had then grieved in secret, and he might never have known it but for her friend's affectionate anxiety concerning her! And he had thought her proud and cold and unyielding, that time was changing her, that she had forgotten and cared not for the past, until that slight quivering of her lips had partly shown him his mistake, and then

Nelly's words had confirmed his knowledge of the suffering hidden so quietly ! But was it for him, or was it for some other cause ? The doubt was like a knife in Norman's heart, and he would not admit it. Gently he entered the library, and found to his relief that Violet was alone. She was leaning listlessly against a window which looked on to the lake, gazing dreamily at the calm blue waters. She turned round and coloured slightly on seeing who entered.

"They are gone into the drawing-room," she said as quietly as she could.

"I did not come to find them ; I came to you, Violet. *Why* did you refuse to come out with me ?" and as Norman came nearer, the deep, tender voice she loved and the earnest gaze of the piercing grey eyes greeted the yearning heart again. It was all that was needed to make her give way entirely. She had felt at the time that Norman had seen the emotion she had been unable to hide any longer, but she had thought he cared nothing for it !

"Norman !" she said in a trembling voice, "I *wanted* to go so much ! I *must* say it ; I have been so unhappy ; forgive me ; you

know I could not mean those hasty words I said yesterday—oh! you cannot think so!” and the soft, tearful eyes looked up with such simple, childlike, sorrowful earnestness, that Norman’s cold, cruel words came back to him with painful force. Why had he been so blind, so slow to seek forgiveness? There was an almost irresistible impulse to take the slight girlish form to his heart; but he might only take the little hand and hold it very fast within his own.

“Violet, I cannot bear to hear you ask me for forgiveness; it is I who must beg it of you; it is for this I have come. I was mad, unreasonable, and you were only too gentle. You do not know the pain it gives me now. Little Violet, will you forget what has passed? If you knew my heart, you would see there my excuse for what I said in my unreasonableness. Let it be as it was before between us, Violet, as though this had never occurred;” and there was a world of tender entreaty in Norman’s eyes as he looked down into Violet’s face.

“And you *will* be just the same, Norman, it will be like the happy days at Ashleigh Court before”—and then she stopped, blushing

vividly as she found her happiness had led her into saying so much. She had spoken with all her old earnestness, with a joyous light in her eyes, and never since his return had her manner to Norman been so full of the old childlike confidence. The young man's gaze rested very fondly on his girlish companion, as a hope very, very sweet arose in his heart, inspired by her blushing confusion.

"Only the *same*, Violet?" he asked, with passionate earnestness. "Do you not know what I would ask you, what I want to say to you now before I let you go? I cannot wait any longer, not even until we are at home at Ashleigh Court."

Violet trembled so that Norman made her sit down, and placing himself beside her, he continued,—

"Will you have patience with me while I tell you all I wish you to know, Violet, before I ask you for your answer?"

And so as they sat there side by side, Norman with his eyes resting upon Violet, and she not looking at him but listening, oh! how attentively, to every word he spoke, gazing out on to beautiful Windermere, he went on in a low voice,—

“I am going to tell you, Violet, what I wish you to hear from myself, even though you may never hear it from others. If things had come to pass as I once hoped, we might never have met, or you would have found me with a wife when you came to Ashleigh Court.” Violet started slightly, but she was not surprised. “Yes, I have loved before, or fancied I did; but long before I saw you, I had seen my delusion so plainly as to feel a deep, deep thankfulness for my escape from what I had once confidently hoped for. Nearly five years ago, when I had just left Oxford, I accepted the invitation of an English friend of mine to visit him in Paris, where he lived with his family. Amongst the friends who came to their house was a young lady, by name Cécile du Fleur, daughter of the Baron du Fleur, whose chateau was a few miles out of Paris. She was an only child, and had no mother, so was always chaperoned by her aunt, her father’s sister, who lived with them. Cécile was about eighteen, and had been at school in London five years. She had been at home about a year when I met her, and with her mixture of French and

English manners she was singularly fascinating, to me at least. She was exceedingly lovely in appearance, and I thought her artlessness itself. Dazzled by her grace and beauty, for I was very young myself—only twenty-one—I soon fell violently in love with her, and confidently hoped to win her for my wife. You may wonder at my telling you all this, but I want you to know *everything*, and I *could* not keep it from you now, and I have such *perfect* trust in you, little Violet. With her English education, Cécile had acquired English ideas, and went more into society than the generality of young girls do in France. Her father allowed it, as he was very indulgent to her; so I had constant opportunities of meeting her, though she was, of course, always accompanied by her aunt. She was not long in perceiving my sentiments, and treated me with marked encouragement, and the hope that she already loved me filled me with joy. My idol had infatuated me completely, Violet; I thought of nothing else day or night. I never named her in my letters to my mother, for I did not wish her to know my suspense, and would say nothing until I could speak of Cécile as my promised wife.

“I made her father’s acquaintance at a fête given at the chateau at which Cécile presided with her natural grace and liveliness. The Baron du Fleur was a fine old French gentleman, and his kindness and courtesy to me gave me still greater hopes of winning my idol. I went several times to the Chateau du Fleur afterwards, and it was during one of my visits there that, being alone in the garden with Cécile, I told her of my love. After some apparent hesatition on her part, I drew from her the acknowledgment that she loved me in return. I believed her, Violet, and thought my happiness complete. Her father consented freely to the engagement between us, and showed me extreme favour. Though he must feel the separation when his daughter had to reside so far from him, he would not mar our happiness by withholding his consent a moment. My mother wrote a very kind letter to Cécile, saying how gladly she would welcome her as her daughter, and Cécile showed me the letter with a very naïve look of her false blue eyes, which I often remembered afterwards with bitter indignation.

“I was continually now at the chateau,

revelling in Cécile's company, which she gave me freely. Everything I thought could please her I gave her or did for her, fully repaid by her smiles and favour. I returned home to England about three months after my first arrival in Paris, but my correspondence with Cécile was close and frequent. I do not know whether my mother feared that all might not go on so well, though she had not yet seen Cécile, but, by her advice, I kept my engagement almost a secret, only herself and the Arnotts knowing of it. I knew that it would be a year or two before Cécile's father would part with her, for she always told me this whenever I named our intended marriage. When I had been at home three or four months, the Baron de Fleur sent an invitation for myself and my mother to visit them, which we accepted, for I was extremely anxious to introduce Cécile to my mother. I remember, Violet, how bitterly I recalled afterwards the joy I felt on finding myself again in France. The Baron and his sister made us most welcome, and I think my mother was favourably impressed with Cécile, for she possessed the art of making herself always fascinating and agreeable.

“For the first time I now saw the Comte de Clichy, who came constantly to the chateau, to visit Cécile’s father, as I thought. They had known him some time, but he had been from home during my former stay in Paris. He was about forty, I think, plain-looking, but clever, and was possessed of great wealth and several large estates in the south of France. He was unmarried, and Cécile often said to me, in jest as I thought, that it would be a fine thing to be Comtesse de Clichy, and that she had several friends who were very anxious for the honour. I saw that the Count admired Cécile, but I did not dream of being jealous then. Who could help admiring her, I thought. And she herself often laughed about his admiration, as though it were a good joke. And all this time I was received by her friends as her accepted lover and future husband. I was constantly at her side, enchanted with the marks of affection she showed me with such apparent artlessness and *naïveté*.

“This went on in an unbroken course for some weeks. There was no indication of change in Cécile’s feeling towards me, until one morning she was missing when we all

met downstairs, and after having found that she was neither in her room nor the garden, we began to feel uneasy as to where she had gone. While we were searching, a note was brought to me, which had been left by a child, who said that it had been given to him from a carriage window two or three hours previously by a lady who told him not to deliver it for an hour at least. The note told me that by the time I had read it Cécile would be the Comtesse de Clichy. She wrote that she had been for some weeks engaged to the Count, secretly, for fear of her father's interference. She told me that she had discovered that she could never really love me, and that it was better to tell me so now than to have found it out after marriage. She ended her note by the mockery of hoping I would forgive her, etc. Her maid, the only confidante with whom she had shared her secret, had left the chateau with her. I am not going to tell you, Violet, what I felt; you have a heart, which Cécile had not, and you know what it must have been to find so suddenly that she whom I had fancied an angel, on whom I had wasted my affections, was what she now proved herself, when she

dispelled the illusion which her beauty and arts had cast round me.

“I shall never forget her father’s indignation at her dishonourable conduct ; she had judged rightly what his anger would be. She wrote to him a day or two later, asking him, now that it could not be undone, and she was Comtesse de Clichy, to forgive her hasty marriage, and receive her and her husband as a parent. She attempted some excuses, saying that but for the fear of being separated from the Count she would have told him at once when she accepted de Clichy’s offer, and that she never could have married Monsieur Ashleigh, as she called me. It was the Count who had urged her to secrecy and the present step, she said. It was a bitter blow to the Baron to find that his daughter could thus deceive him, and that she was capable of such conduct as was now avowed. His kindness to me was very great at this time, and I must always remember him with respect and affection. I knew now, Violet, that Cécile had never loved me, that it had pleased her to have a lover to pay her attention and homage, and whom she might some day marry if nothing better offered itself,”

and Norman's tone was very bitter as he said this.

“I did not, nor did my mother or her father, believe that she loved de Clichy, indeed she did not attempt in her letter to persuade us so; it was too plainly his wealth and position that were the inducements, together with her own desire to remain in France, where she had so many admirers. I could have borne it better if Cécile had told me at once that she must reject me when she accepted de Clichy's offer, it would have been less heartless on her part; but to have been her dupe for so many weeks, until it became convenient to her and the Count to carry out their intention, was as galling to my pride as Cécile's faithlessness was painful to my heart. My disenchantment was as complete as my delusion had been, and in the bitterness of my indignation, I told myself that love and I had parted company for ever, that never, even in the distant future, would I give anyone the chance of deceiving me again. The wound was very deep, Violet, but in time I found it had hurt my pride more than any tenderer feeling, and I could even feel thankful for my escape.

“Not very long after my return to England with my mother I met the Count and Countess de Clichy quite unexpectedly at an entertainment in London, where they were staying sometime. If anything was needed to show me how completely Cécile’s image was banished from my heart, it was this meeting, when I wondered the entire evening how I had ever been able to love her, and to be so blind to her real nature. She was not the least abashed, but spoke to me with the friendly air of an old acquaintance, and seemed to consider what had occurred between us as only a disagreeable episode which the sooner both of us forgot the better. Her giddiness and frivolity, which I had mistaken for artless and innocent gaiety, were very conspicuous during the evening, when her beauty and elegance attracted universal admiration. I saw her husband was jealous of her already, and in the midst of my contempt and profound indifference for her, I could not but pity her, for she even could not excite any feeling so strong as dislike in me now.

“Poor Cécile! we heard of her death two years later, and it is useless to speak

unkindly of her now; but I believe her husband had very soon found out for what she married him, and did not treat her kindly. But from that time I lost faith in woman, and my resolution was taken to be steeled against the beguilements of love in future. It was a mad, foolish resolve, especially for one so young as I was, and it was worse to fancy that because the object of my first boyish passion had proved false, I was entitled to condemn women in general, especially when I had such a one as my dear mother always with me. To her I was indebted that so very few in England had known of my engagement, thus saving my pride a still greater blow.

“You see I have made you listen to all this, Violet, without being afraid or ashamed to give you my whole confidence, so that you may be better able to understand and forgive any haughtiness or unreasonableness I have ever unthinkingly or sometimes in the agony of my heart shown to you. I will not conceal from you that when I first learnt from my mother that she was bringing you to live at Ashleigh Court, though I would not breathe any objection to

her, for her wish has always been law to me, yet I was vexed and annoyed at the intrusion on our privacy of a young lady who might expect politeness and attention from me. My dislike to the new aspect of our household was a little overcome by my mother's letters concerning you, and I was glad she had a young companion who had so entirely gained her affection and esteem. But I cannot help smiling now, when I remember how I congratulated myself on my achievement in sending you a friendly message shortly before my return home.

"I came home, and you remember our first meeting. You did not know how I was attracted by your very shyness and reluctance to speak to me, nor how strongly you interested me from the first moment you raised your eyes, so unlike Cécile's, to my face. From that day a new life seemed to open to me, and as the days passed on, I felt, in spite of myself, that if you were to leave Ashleigh Court, I should miss you strangely. I am afraid, little Violet, that it was not always pure, disinterested kindness for which I have received your thanks so often. It afforded me happiness to give you

pleasure ; to see you smile, even, always gave me joy. Almost before I knew it, my stern resolution had vanished, and I could only feel ashamed of my foolishness in forming it ; but until I knew you, Violet, I had never felt any temptation to swerve from it. Then the time came when I could no longer conceal from myself, that, child as you were, you had stolen my heart, rousing within it a love not such as I had lavished on Cécile, boyish and blind in its fervour, and called forth by the first sight of her beauty, but a love which had grown until it became part of my man's nature, passionate, deep, and tender, wholly different from the youthful fancy which had left no tender recollection behind when once the enchantment was dispelled.

“ I never fancied you an angel, Violet, as I had fancied Cécile, or a model of impossible perfection, for I loved everything about you : your very faults were dear to me as part of yourself. I loved to picture the days when you would be my wife, as you walked or sat by my side, little knowing my thoughts. I was jealous and impatient of Miss Lyndsay and the lessons which deprived me so much of your company. I

used to tremble to think that I might lose you, that another more favoured than myself might take you from me, when the time should come for you to mix in society.

“I cannot tell you what I felt when I found I had to go away, to leave you, and for an indefinite time. The temptation was terribly strong to try and win your love and promise to be my wife, before I left you, but I conquered it, Violet, for it would have been taking advantage of your friendship for me and your extreme youth and inexperience to bind you by a promise thus early, even if you were willing to give it to me. Or you might refuse me finally, I told myself, telling me it was only friendship you felt for me ; and I could not bear this last thought, the thought that perhaps you could never even in the future learn to love me. So I determined not to speak to you of my love, to let you be free until my return, and then I would seek you, Violet. It was terribly hard to keep my resolution during the few days before my departure, for I feared I was leaving you to be sought and perhaps won by another. But my entire trust in your truth, and my firm confidence that you would never give yourself

to one who had not your whole heart, sustained me, and I went away, as you know, with my love untold. And during my long absence, night and day my thoughts were with the little girl I had left at home, who was more to me than all the world, more than the dear mother whom she was taking care of for me. You do not know how latterly I have dreaded what my mother might tell me in her letters concerning you, nor my joy on finding that you were still free, the same Violet I had left. And when I wrote to you for your birthday, my letter was such a short one because I dare not trust myself to write a longer one. Then it was so hard to find you absent when I came home at last, when for days I had been picturing our meeting, which must take place now among strangers.

“At last the moment came for which I had waited so long, and I looked on you again, changed outwardly a little, but only so that no one now could tell me you were not beautiful; and I rejoiced, Violet, because the least thing about you is so dear to me, and your looks are part of yourself. Forgive me if I am presumptuous, but there

have been times in the past, and lately too, when I have hoped confidently that my love was not vain, that my happiness was not destined to be destroyed, that it was more than friendship you felt for me. You can guess my agony yesterday when, overcome by tormenting doubt, I fancied I had learnt the worst. I became calm afterwards, and then hope rose again, for I saw how mad and unreasonable I had been. Ever since I have been longing to ask you for forgiveness and to learn the truth from your own lips, for I cannot bear, as I had intended, the suspense of waiting until our visit here is over."

He paused a minute, and then went on,—

"Little Violet, I have told you everything now, and you know how entire and absorbing is the love I offer you. Will you accept it, can you bless me with yours in return? will you trust your happiness to me and be my wife, my very own? Heaven help me to bear it, Violet, if you must refuse, for of my own strength I cannot."

Norman's voice was terribly agitated as he spoke those last words, and, with an intense emotion stamped on his face, he waited for Violet's answer, with his deep grey eyes

bent down upon her. There was a pause of about a moment, and then Violet turned towards him and silently gave him her hand, which he held clasped very fast within his own. Then she raised her eyes to his face with that look he loved so well, but which was intensified now with the love she need no longer conceal,—

“Oh, Norman, you know what I would like to say, but I can’t, I’m so—so happy!”

And then Violet broke down and wept out freely her overwhelming happiness and emotion. And Norman took her in his arms and soothed her with the first sweet lover’s kiss.

“My own darling!” he whispered, with his voice trembling strangely, for he saw now more plainly than words could have told him how deep must have been Violet’s suffering during the last day or two, how his cruel, hasty words must have pained the sensitive heart. “My poor little Violet, my very own now!” and the endearing words and deep, tender voice calmed Violet’s emotion, and she looked up again, smiling through the joyous tears,—

“I know I’m very silly, Norman, but I

can't help it. It is so very sweet, after I had been thinking it was to be so different, that I can hardly believe it! But I'm all right now, and you'll forgive me for being so silly, won't you?"

"Silly, Violet? Don't you know that your 'silliness,' as you call it, is the sweetest and most precious answer you could have given me! But still, my darling, it shows me more than ever how cruel I was yesterday. Can you forgive me for the pain I gave you? I *never* can forgive myself."

"But you *must*, or you will make me unhappy. Why, I've almost forgotten now what you said exactly, so you see there's nothing for me to forgive; indeed I'm in earnest," and she looked up with a bright smile.

"God bless you, little Violet!" said Norman fervently, as he took one of the little hands and played with it caressingly. "But, by the by, you have made me so very, very happy that I forgot you have not told me that you are not going to send me away, that you will take me for your husband, and—and I want so much to hear you tell me that—you love me, Violet;" and Nor-

man's looks were bent upon her with the smile she loved so well.

For a moment Violet bent her face to hide the deep blush which covered it, then she raised her eyes again and met Norman's gaze with a low, joyous laugh,—

“How careless of me, Norman! But I was so ‘silly’ that I forgot it too. Well, I *don't* want to send you away, and I *will*—take you for—my husband, Mr. Ashleigh,—will that do?” and her face shone with a joyous playfulness as Norman joined in the happy laugh.

“Say something more, Violet,” he whispered, a minute later, and then Violet's smile changed to a deep, intense earnestness as the blush rose again vividly to her face, and with her hands fast clasped in Norman's she spoke the sweet confession he so longed to hear.

“I do love you, Norman, so very, very much. And I may tell you now, I think—I have done ever since—I knew you first, though I did not think of it until you were going away to India. Oh, if you knew how desolate that year was, how I used to be always fancying you might

never come back safely, or if you did, you would no longer care about me, even as a friend! For I can hardly believe it even yet, it seems so very, very sweet to be really true. And don't think me foolish, but I can't help wishing, for your sake, that I were beautiful, and more——"

But Norman interrupted her by drawing her closer, and stealing another kiss from her lips.

"God bless you, my darling; I shall ask you to tell me all that over again, very often, in future; I shall never grow tired of hearing it," he said, with deep emotion. "But now," he went on, "I am going to scold you for that last speech, which *was* very foolish indeed, little Violet, and shall never be concluded. In the first place, one never need wish for what one has already, and you *have* beauty, you blind little girl, —now don't contradict, or I shall think you are fishing for compliments. And then, don't you know, that if all the rest of the world thought you plain, you would still be beautiful to me, my darling. It was Cécile du Fleur's face that drew me to her, and inspired my boyish passion; but it is

you yourself who make me love your face and your beauty, because they are yours. Listen: having once loved you as I do, even if (forgive me for saying it) it could be possible for you ever to prove faithless to me, I could never cease to love you or forget you. I *cannot* tell you properly what my love for you is, my darling, but when you are my wife, when my whole life shall be spent in making you happy, you shall see what it is," and the deep voice trembled.

"And may I be able to show you what mine is for you!" Violet whispered, as she rested in Norman's embrace, wondering at her happiness, and the precious minutes flew by, uncounted by either of them.

It was peculiarly sweet to one of Norman's proud, exclusive nature to know how fresh and true and entirely his own was the heart his young wife would give to him when they should pledge their faith to one another at the altar, and over and over again he told himself how proudly he would cherish the pure treasure of this young girl's love.

For nearly an hour they sat there, forgetting everything but each other; and Norman

gently and fondly drew from Violet the inner history of the past year, with the hopes and fears so carefully hidden until now; then, she spoke of Mr. Wilmot and his hateful attentions, and Norman's brow contracted with the frown which brought out so strongly the likeness to the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh.

"He will not dare to pursue you, now that you have given me the right to make him answer to me for it if he annoys you."

"I don't think he will wish to do so, any longer, Norman." And after a little hesitation, Violet went on. "I don't know whether it is fair to tell you, but it will be a secret from everyone but you and grand-mamma, and I like you to know *everything*; I should even if *you* had not told *me* all so freely."

And then she told him of Mr. Wilmot's proposal, and her own answer, as briefly and quietly as she could, not naming his churlish refusal of her good wishes, or his rude language on leaving her. Norman smiled as she concluded, and took her hand again as he said,—

“Thank you, Violet, for telling me. You know we must know everything about each other now, and the secret is safe with me. Poor Mr. Wilmot! I can afford to be sorry for him,” and he looked at her with a very earnest, tender gaze.

Then suddenly, all at once, Violet exclaimed,—

“Norman! do you know, until this moment I had forgotten all about the ball!”

He laughed and released her hand as she went and stood by the window.

“It must be getting late,” she continued, as she blushed consciously, “and they must be coming in; see, there is Miss Woodford and her lover.”

“And here is Miss Mortimer and hers,” rejoined Norman, smiling, as he came and stood by her side.

Yes; she could call him by that title now, and half shyly, half proudly she glanced at the tall figure, with its noble bearing, and up into the refined, attractive face.

“I shall have Nelly coming to look after me directly to go with her to dress. I may tell her, may I not, Norman?”

“Certainly,” he laughed; “but I am afraid

Miss Nelly will be very indignant, for she considers no one entitled to you but herself, and I expect I shall have to apologize for my presumption in taking possession of you. But, my mother must hear it the first; it will make her so happy. Will you come with me now to find her? I am so impatient for her to wish me joy and welcome you as her daughter."

"Ah, yes, grandmamma must know my happiness before anyone else," exclaimed Violet.

"You won't have to call her so much longer now, but by a still dearer title, my darling."

"Oh, Norman, will she think me good enough for you! I am so young and——"

"Violet!" and Norman drew the girlish form once more to his heart, "never say that again. You are young? Is not that all the better and sweeter to me? Did I not love you when you were younger still, and would have made you even then if it had been possible?" Then smilingly releasing her, he added, "And then I suppose I shall have to let you go upstairs to this mysterious dressing operation. I am sure

you cannot look nicer than you do now, whatever finery you put on," and he looked with fond admiration at Violet in her pretty summer muslin dress.

She laughed merrily as he did so.

"Ah, you'll see. It shows how little you know on the subject, and I'm afraid you've not much taste, so I shall not consult you."

They were just in time to find Mrs. Ashleigh alone in the drawing-room before the rest came in from the garden.

"Mother," said Norman, "will you welcome this little girl, who has just promised to be my wife?" and he led the blushing Violet to Mrs. Ashleigh, who looked a moment at them both and then clasped Violet in her arms.

"My darling Violet, is it really true? This is indeed happy news! I have hoped for it latterly, and yet scarcely dared to expect it. Let me wish you joy, Norman, on the wife you will possess, and the daughter you have given me. Violet, you will have a good husband in my Norman, though I ought not to praise him to his face," she added, smiling with fond admiration at her son. "Well, God bless you both, for you have made me very

happy indeed. How quietly you have managed it all, while they were all out of the way! You must enjoy yourself to-night, my love, at your first ball. You know, Norman, you must let Violet dance with as many partners as she likes, without being the least jealous," and Mrs. Ashleigh laughed kindly, "and Violet must let you do the same."

"What a very amicable arrangement, mother! But I daresay we can promise to comply with it for one night, can't we, Violet?"

As Norman ceased speaking, most of those who had been in the garden entered the room, and Nelly went up at once towards Violet with a smile, guessing that whatever had been amiss must be righted now, by Violet's face, and the fact of her being there alone with Norman and Mrs. Ashleigh.

"It is time to dress now, my dear," she said, "and delighted I am, for I have been so impatient for it all day. I think you had better all go up at once too, or you'll have mamma turning you out of this room directly," and linking her arm in Violet's, she bore her away.

Norman smiled as Violet caught his glance

in passing him, and Eleanor Gordon instantly noted the incident, and guessed, to her chagrin, that all was right again between them.

“Nelly,” said Violet, as they reached their room, “I want to tell you something before we begin to dress,” and the blushes came quickly to her face.

“Oh, that’s right! I like hearing news, if it’s good, of course. So I won’t call Jane just yet.”

Then holding Nelly’s hand, Violet whispered to her the news of her happiness. Almost before she had concluded, Nelly had clasped her round the neck and kissed her.

“Oh, you dear darling! I am so glad. I’m sure I wish you joy with all my heart.”

“Thank you, Nelly. I hope you will soon be as happy yourself as I am.”

“Oh, as for that, I don’t know whether it would suit me, you see. I would rather watch you and Loo. Don’t be vexed if I tell you I’m not very surprised. I’m rather wise in these matters, not from experience, of course. Why, the very evening Mr. Ashleigh arrived, and I saw him look at you, though you did not, as you shook hands, I saw how it was with him. I couldn’t help guessing,

darling, but I've never teased you about him, have I?"

"No, you never have, Nelly, you've never been anything but kind since I came."

After a minute's silence, Nelly suddenly exclaimed, with comic dismay,—

"And so you are really engaged, and will soon have to give up your precious liberty for Mr. Ashleigh! And you are only seventeen, and have never been to a ball yet! Oh, dear!"

Violet laughed outright. "Yes, isn't it dreadful!"

"Well, you don't look very miserable, certainly; but it is a very serious thing, when one thinks about it. I don't think I could ever bring myself to give up my precious freedom to anybody when it came to the point."

"Ah, wait a little. Won't I enjoy seeing you fairly caught and in love, Nelly!"

"You'll have to wait long enough, I can tell you, you naughty girl. I'm nineteen now, and there's not the smallest chance of my being anything but plain Nelly Woodford for years to come. When I'm thirty, I may think of settling down perhaps. Just fancy!"

in a few months I shall have to call you Mrs. Norman Ashleigh! What a darling little wife you'll look! I must be your friend still; but I suppose Mr. Ashleigh will be jealous every time you waste a kiss on me; and because he thinks me a flighty thing, you'll cast me off, perhaps," and Nelly gave a pretty, rueful look at Violet.

"You absurd girl! how you do talk! I declare I shall tell Norman this evening before your face what you say, and he shall defend himself. Of course you must be my bridesmaid, Nelly, and you know you are to come and stay with us soon at Ashleigh Court, and you shall see whether I am so ungrateful or not."

"Never mind me, Violet, I did not really think so, you know. And I shall be delighted to be your bridesmaid, love, and stand by to see you sacrificed, as they say." Then, very earnestly and seriously, Nelly added, "You know how well we all think of Mr. Ashleigh, Violet, and papa and Harry are bewitched about him. How happy you *will* be!"

Love's own beauty was over Violet to-night, lighting up the expressive face and its softly beautiful eyes with a wondrous charm. The

light, fairy-like ball dress suited her slight, graceful figure singularly well, and Nelly was lost in admiration, telling her she would be one of the belles of the evening, as she made her survey herself again before the full-length glass.

The blush of pleasure mounted to Violet's cheek as she saw that she did in truth look beautiful. It was all for Norman, for his sake and to please him, that she felt happy she looked so well. And like him, Violet was a passionate lover of the beautiful, and there was no petty vanity in the joy of possessing what she had so often admired in others and unconsciously coveted for herself ever since she came to know Norman. In the old London life, when no one had cared how she looked, when there had been no one to please, Violet's innate love of grace and beauty had been chiefly useful to her imagination in enabling her to form a world for herself amongst her books and her own thoughts; but love had called forth the desire to please the eye of him she loved: how much more now when she knew she was the object of his own deep, strong attachment!

"Violet, you are always graceful," said

Nelly, "but to-night you look—— Well, then, I won't flatter, but if Mr. Ashleigh does not go into raptures when he sees you, he doesn't deserve to have you, there! Look like this on your wedding day, and with Mr. Ashleigh so tall and splendid-looking, you'll be a couple worth going to see. You'll beat Loo and Charles Acton."

"Oh, you flatterer! To pay you out I will tell you what I think of you, that you're always pretty and bewitching, but prettier than ever to-night, Nelly."

Nelly curtsied with mock ceremony.

"Of course, Violet, you'll both be overwhelmed with congratulations, for I suppose it is not to be a stupid secret. I'm rather sorry, though, that it was not put off till to-morrow instead of happening to-day, as it must be rather tiresome to be 'engaged' at one's first ball. There will be so many nice partners, and you can't care about any of them, I suppose. Mr. Ashleigh is sure to look daggers while you are dancing with anyone but himself, and you'll be miserable if he ventures to be civil to any pretty girl but you. See how much better off I am; nobody cares whom I dance with, and I

don't care who anybody else dances with: the proper way to enjoy a ball."

"Oh, but Norman and I have made an agreement not to be the least jealous of each other this evening. Grandmamma proposed we should not.

"Just like dear Mrs. Ashleigh! Now I call that sensible, and I shall recommend the arrangement to Loo and Charles, for they are particularly stupid at a dance. They sit together nearly all the evening; like two old owls. By the by, a friend of mine who will be here to-night, Jessie Cameron, a very pretty Scotch girl, generally falls in love at every dance she goes to. She makes me her confidante if I'm present, and I quite expect it will be Norman Ashleigh she will be sentimental about this time; but don't hate her or do anything desperate to her, for it will be all gone by the morning, especially if I shock her by telling her he is engaged;" and Nelly laughingly led Violet downstairs.

CHAPTER V.

THEY were first down in the drawing-room, and after they had sat talking for a few minutes they heard some one else enter, and, looking round, saw it was Norman.

“I guessed he would hurry down in hopes of finding you,” whispered Nelly to Violet.

As Norman came towards them, Nelly rose and said smilingly,—

“Let me congratulate you, Mr. Ashleigh, very, very much. Violet has told me, and I am so glad.”

“Thank you, Miss Nelly; you are very kind, and I prize your good wishes particularly, as you are so especially Violet’s friend.”

Then Nelly escaped on some pretext, and left the lovers alone. Norman sat down by Violet with a tender look of admiration.

“And so this is the result of the ‘dressing!’ Do you know how beautiful you look, my darling?”

The happy blush rose to Violet's face, but she replied laughingly,—

“Ah, you see, it is the dress.”

“It is not the dress, Violet. It is very pretty and graceful, and if you like I will own I was wrong on the matter this afternoon; but it is yourself, your face that seems more beautiful than ever to me this evening.”

“It is because I am so happy, Norman,” whispered Violet, with the joyous love light shining in her brown eyes.

She was right; it was such intense happiness to know that Norman loved her, not only now and latterly, but that he had loved her even during the past days before she herself had fully awakened to the knowledge of her love for him; it was such joy to know that during that long absence, while she had feared, and hoped, and rejoiced by turns, as she looked forward so longingly to his return, she had so entirely occupied his heart and thoughts.

Major and Mrs. Woodford, who had already been told by Mrs. Ashleigh of what had happened, congratulated Norman and Violet most heartily and sincerely. Besides feeling glad for their happiness, Mrs. Woodford was

now relieved of her uneasiness concerning Violet on the score of Mr. Wilmot. She had not been able to subdue her distrust of him, try as she would, and it was a matter of rejoicing to her that his pursuit of Violet would now be effectually ended by her engagement to Norman Ashleigh.

"It will make us feel terribly old, Norman, to see you young people getting married around us," said the Major. "Then Loo will be gone directly, and Harry will never rest until he does the same."

"Ah, but you'll have *me* upon your hands for a long time yet, papa, I can promise you," put in Nelly.

"Well, we couldn't spare you, little Nell," replied her father, with a fond smile; "who would keep us alive if you left us?"

"Of course you couldn't spare me, papa. And you know I'd rather have you than all the lovers in Christendom," said Nelly, coaxingly; and then looking with merry defiance at Norman and Violet, she left the group.

The room was rapidly filling now, and amongst the many girls, many of them pretty and all well-dressed, Eleanor Gordon was certainly one of the handsomest. As

she completed her perfect toilet that evening, she had surveyed herself with satisfied triumph.

“Norman Ashleigh shall at least be forced to acknowledge to himself my superior beauty, though he chooses to pass me by for Violet, whom I have always despised so. How is it that she, without beauty or with only such as exists in his fancy, has managed to infatuate him so completely!” and the haughty, selfish heart chafed at the love that held it captive, the love that a day might turn to revengeful hatred.

Eleanor did not know that the time was past when Norman could be caught by a beautiful face, that he had known many more beautiful than herself, and had passed them without a thought. She did not know the history of Cécile du Fleur, or she might have seen that Norman's love for Violet was a feeling so strong, so deep, so unlike his first attachment, which had been founded on the extreme loveliness of its object, that if Violet were to lose to-morrow the outward charms, the graceful exterior which were so dear to him as hers, he would love her none the less, but regret merely the loss of her external

ornaments and cherish her only more tenderly than before.

“Ah, there is Eleanor,” Violet said to Norman, as she saw her enter the room; “how handsome she looks, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, certainly, but she is too stately for so young a girl, too much so to be graceful. She reminds me too much of a beautiful statue.”

And Norman did not know that his last words were overheard by Louis Wilmot, who passed unperceived behind him and Violet.

Just then the musicians struck up for the first quadrille, and the dancers began to take their places.

“Now, little Violet, for our first dance together,” and Norman led her to the dancing room, and they were soon engaged in the quadrille.

How joyous everything seemed to Violet that evening, how amused and delighted she was with the brilliancy and novelty of the scene! Her own happiness invested everything around her with a charm such as she had never felt in her life before. She could now almost be thankful for the misunderstanding between Norman and herself, for it had

hastened the present joy and caused her to hear from him sooner than might otherwise have been the story of his love. There was no need now for reserve and coldness, and as she talked to Norman with all the old confidence and the manner he loved so well, how plainly he saw the meaning of the changed demeanour under which the modest, tender love had hidden itself so often lately and which he had thought to be pride and cold reserve and indifference! It had all been the effort of the delicate nature to hide her love from him while it was yet unsought, the love which was given to him now so truly and entirely. How blind and cruel he had been at times! And Violet in her turn knew now how the coldness and shyness she had often shown towards him, and, more than all, her resentful words on the previous day, must have wrung Norman's heart, and what he must have felt all through their estrangement.

Nelly kept to her intention of "looking after" Violet, though she told her laughingly that she did not need her care now, adding that Norman had monopolised far too many of Violet's dances, in her opinion. Greatly

to Violet's relief, Mr. Wilmot's name was not once upon her card when it was filled up. He seemed determined to hold politely aloof from her, and she could not but feel glad and thankful, for there must have been an awkwardness as yet in their intercourse. He knew nothing of her engagement to Norman, nor did Eleanor Gordon, who had not had an opportunity of hearing the news from Louisa Woodford, and was hardly likely to be told by Nelly.

Norman and Nelly had finished a dance together, and came and sat by Violet, who smiled slyly at Nelly as she turned to Norman,—

“Oh, Norman, I want you to give Nelly a good scolding. Shall I tell you what she has been saying?”

“Say ‘no,’ please, Mr. Ashleigh,” and Nelly looked rather imploringly at Violet.

“That makes me more curious to hear it, Miss Nelly; but I promise to bear it very patiently,” said Norman, smiling.

“You know I said I would tell, Nelly,” said Violet laughingly. “Nelly thinks, Norman, that you will try to make me give up my friendship with her, that you’ll be jealous of every word we have together, in short, that you are

a terrible tyrant, and I want you to defend yourself," and Violet smiled demurely, as she met his amused glance.

"What a dreadful opinion you must have of me, Miss Nelly! What shall I say to try and change it? But even if I were so ill-naturedly inclined as you imagine, I should certainly meet with a most effectual resistance from Violet herself," and he turned to the latter with a smile. "Will you take me into your good graces, Miss Nelly, if I promise to do all in my power to further the friendship between you and Violet, and if I also assure you that I never thought of doing otherwise."

"Indeed you are very good, Mr. Ashleigh, and it was too bad of Violet to tell tales, though, of course, she said she would, and she never breaks her word I know. You see I've had one or two friends who as soon as they were married, or even engaged, began quite to forget me, and neglected me altogether, so I could not help telling Violet that I expected it would be the same with her. And I think it a great shame to give up one's friends just because one happens to get married!" and Nelly looked somewhat disdainful as she spoke the last word.

“And you lay all the blame of it on the gentlemen? How very hard you are upon us, Miss Nelly! But you must not be so in my case, for I promise you that when you come to Ashleigh Court, you and Violet may exchange as many as twenty kisses a day without disturbing my equanimity in the least. Are you satisfied?”

“You are really very generous, Mr. Ashleigh, and I’m sure I’m very much obliged to you,” laughed Nelly, “and I’m sorry I said such a thing about you. But after all (don’t be offended, Mr. Ashleigh) it does seem dreadful that Violet is engaged and actually going to be married so young!”

Norman laughed at her comic earnestness.

“Do you think she looks so very miserable about it?” and he turned with a fond look to Violet.

“Norman, you know Nelly herself will not think of such a thing until she is thirty, she says, so you must not be surprised at her pitying me.”

“Of course I couldn’t think of giving up *my* freedom before I’m at least thirty; but Violet persists in looking so very happy that my pity for her is fast going.”

Here the music recommenced, and Harry Woodford came towards Violet, to whom he was engaged for the next dance.

"I've come to claim Miss Mortimer, Norman, so you must resign her for the present."

"What an indefatigable dancer you are, Violet! I declare I shall be jealous if Harry runs off with you much oftener."

"I'm very sorry for you, but it can't be helped. You are forgetting your promise already, you see," laughed Violet, as she took Harry's arm, and as she looked back Norman met her fond though merry glance. How he loved to see her thorough, fresh enjoyment of everything, knowing too *why* she was so happy, so joyous. It chanced that he was engaged to Eleanor Gordon for this quadrille, and that their *vis-à-vis* were Harry and Violet, who smiled on seeing it was so.

"So you are determined to look after us, Norman?" said Harry.

Eleanor heard him, and started slightly, for as yet no one had told her of Violet's engagement; but Harry's words raised a suspicion in her mind of the truth, and she began to watch Norman narrowly. She did not fail to notice

how tenderly his gaze rested upon Violet as she stood opposite laughing and talking with Harry Woodford, and though he was not exactly remiss in due politeness to herself, the bitter jealousy rose afresh in her heart. Why was Norman so blind to her beauty? surely to-night at least he could not but see her superiority over Violet!

And with the two girls so near him at once, Norman *was* contrasting them, certainly, but not to Eleanor's advantage. He was thinking how much more lovely was Violet's expressive face, with the soft, beautiful eyes, in which the joyous light was shining, how much more charming the easy movements of her graceful, girlish figure than Eleanor's cold, fair beauty and too stately elegance of deportment.

The hours were passing quickly, and the evening would soon be over, when Norman and Violet went together to walk in the hall, as the rooms had become excessively warm by this time. They were passing the library door, when Violet missed her fan, and Norman left her to go and look for it, saying he would return directly.

"I will wait for you in the drawing-room, Norman," she said.

It was a bright moonlight night, and Violet stood gazing out at the sky for a minute or two, until she heard a footstep, and turned round, thinking to see Norman. It was not he, however, but Louis Wilmot, and Violet felt a disagreeable sensation at the sight of him. *Why* did he come in here to her?

“I saw in passing that you were here, Miss Mortimer, and you must allow me to admire your taste in preferring a scene like that,” and his eyes were directed towards the window, “to the glare of the ball-room. Allow me to share your pleasure for a few moments. You must be aware that in my present sadness, to-night’s gaiety is utterly distasteful,” and he fixed his melancholy eyes upon Violet’s face, and came still closer to her.

Would Norman never come back? She said nothing, in her uneasiness, but looked towards the door, and made a movement away from Mr. Wilmot, who then suddenly attempted to take her hand,—

“Miss Mortimer, do not go. Surely I have not much intruded upon you to-night, that you should thus refuse to endure my presence for a few moments!”

Proudly and quickly Violet withdrew her

hand, meeting his fierce, restless glance as she did so, and at this moment Norman entered the room.

He had seen Violet's action and the look Mr. Wilmot bestowed on her in return. In her relief at Norman's entrance she turned to him at once and stood close by his side, with the indignant flush still upon her face.

Norman placed himself between her and Louis Wilmot, and his face was terribly stern as he addressed the latter.—

“It is well that my entrance was in time to prevent your further annoyance of Miss Mortimer, and also that you should know that for any future attempt to continue it you will be answerable to me, Mr. Wilmot.”

The truth must have dawned upon Mr. Wilmot now, for his voice was hoarse with suppressed rage as he asked,—

“What do you mean by your constant and impertinent interference between myself and Miss Mortimer? How dare you thus try to prevent my speaking to her, which I have as good a right to do as yourself, and call it to my face annoyance of her! What right have you, I say?”

“The right I possess as her future husband,

Mr. Wilmot," replied Norman calmly, as he drew Violet's hand within his arm. At that moment he could forgive his rival's violent manner and disappointed rage.

Before he left the room Mr. Wilmot stood a moment, and Violet shuddered at the malignance in his eyes as he glared at Norman.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Ashleigh, on your prudence in having so early secured the affections of so wealthy a bride," and he left the room, closing the door heavily behind him.

But in his blind rage, Louis Wilmot had completely overshot his mark, as he himself would feel two minutes later. He had given the crowning point to Violet's sometime suspicion as to his motive for seeking her hand. The redeeming doubts she had entertained, in her generosity, vanished completely, and she was compelled to acknowledge, with pain and indignation, the conviction that it was for her wealth alone that Louis Wilmot had so persistently pursued her. But she had no time to think of herself, for looking up at Norman's face, she trembled at its intense sternness and expression of wounded pride.

"Violet, he shall answer to me for that deliberate insult," and Norman's voice shook with fierce emotion, "spoken before you too, my darling! I could have forgiven anything but that. I did not mind his angry words, for I saw his rage and disappointment; but to take such a paltry revenge, to say such a thing to my face before you, to try and instil into you a doubt of my love!"

Softly Violet's hand was placed in Norman's, and it was her turn to be consoler now.

"But when he could *never possibly* succeed, Norman, dear, why should it matter?" and she looked up tearfully and tenderly.

"My darling! you never thought I feared he could! Don't I know you too well? I have told you how I love you, and your trust could not be even stirred by so miserable and paltry an attempt; but the attempt was made, nevertheless. I wish you could give him all your fortune to-morrow, Violet, and bid him enjoy it, far away somewhere out of sight."

"I wish I could, Norman, for it would save you from being annoyed any more by him."

"I wish to heaven you had never had it!" said Norman fervently.

Violet smiled as she said gently,—

“But, you see, Norman, it can’t be helped now, and I must prize it, because it is poor papa’s last gift, and it is just something to give to you, Norman, besides my important self.”

“I want only yourself, my own Violet;” and some impulse made him stoop and kiss the smiling upturned face.

“Ah, but you said that you loved not only myself but everything about me, so you must love all I have, and whatever belongs to me, you know.”

And Norman laughed with her, for he could not resist her loving gaiety, though his brow was troubled still. In a few moments she added very earnestly,—

“Norman, do promise not to think any more of Mr. Wilmot’s words and his rudeness, promise not to say anything about it to him. He would never have dared to speak like that if he had given himself time to think of it, Norman. Indeed it is not worth your anger. So you will promise me; you must,” she pleaded.

Norman was striving to overcome some strong emotion, Violet saw, for he was silent

for a minute or two, and turned his face away from her. At last he turned to her, and his brow was cleared and his voice calm and tender,—

“May I never refuse you anything in my power to grant, Violet! You may rely upon my promise, for I *cannot* refuse you. And you are right, you wise little girl; you’ve made me see that Mr. Wilmot deserves only contempt; anger is too good for him, so he shall hear no more of mine.”

Violet thanked him with a fond smile, and he whispered as they left the room together,—

“Only two more days, my darling, and we shall be at home, where no one can molest you.”

Meanwhile Louis Wilmot made his way back to the ball-room, feeling, almost before he reached it, that his rage had led him too far. With his ruffled countenance forced into its usual gentlemanly calmness, he went straight towards Eleanor Gordon, who was standing listlessly apart from the dancers. With polite carelessness he addressed her in a low voice,—

“You know the news, of course, Miss

Gordon, but *I* have only just learnt it by chance."

"I have heard no particular news to-day," she replied coldly, without looking at him.

"Then you do not know that your sister and Mr. Ashleigh are engaged?" and he looked at her keenly, as her gaze was fixed apparently on the dancers before her; but she was prepared, and no sign or expression of emotion was visible in her cold, unchanging face.

"Violet Mortimer is not my sister, Mr. Wilmot," she said a little sharply; then turning her face at last towards him, she continued with perfect calmness, "No, I do not happen to have heard before of her engagement. It cannot have existed until to-day, I should think. Everyone naturally expected it, so the news will surprise no one," and she spoke carelessly, as though weary of the subject.

"No, I do not think anyone will be *surprised*," he said, with a strong accent on the last word.

He saw that Eleanor did not wish to keep up the conversation, and evidently wished to be rid of his company; but she should not escape so easily. He knew her secret, and he

could not rest until he had made her betray at least *some* feeling, thus putting herself in his power still further. It would be a slight consolation for his own defeat and recent blind betrayal of himself. "I chanced," he went on with a smile, "quite by accident, of course, in passing, to hear a few words of a close conversation between Mr. Ashleigh and Miss Mortimer. A remark made by the former contained so flattering a compliment to yourself, Miss Gordon, that I cannot deny myself the pleasure of repeating it, unless, indeed, you forbid me."

He guessed she would have no honourable objection to hear what had not been meant to reach her ears, and he was right. She was overcome by her curiosity, much as she wished for strength not to be.

"Well?" she said, carelessly.

"Mr. Ashleigh remarked," continued Louis Wilmot, still looking at Eleanor, though she turned her face partially from him, "after some words equally flattering no doubt, though I did not hear them, that Miss Gordon reminded him too much of a beautiful statue, and the remark evidently met with Miss Mortimer's approbation."

“Norman Ashleigh said that!” and Eleanor spoke more to herself than to Louis Wilmot.

She was fairly startled now out of her self-control, and at last the signs of her inner feelings were visible to her tormentor. The haughty flush rose to her face and her lips quivered indignantly,—

“Mr. Wilmot, I do not believe you,” and the cold blue eyes looked him full in the face now.

But he felt that she did believe him, and he was right.

There was a terrible storm of bitter feeling in her heart just then ; she had thought that Norman Ashleigh, while loving Violet, still admired and acknowledged her surely superior beauty, and now to hear that he had compared her to a thing without life or feeling, and to Violet too, her rival, whom she hated ! And after she had laid aside her pride and striven so to gain him, after she had exerted herself to please him, in a manner of which she had never before been capable !

She had felt no shame in showing him her love unasked ; but if he had passed it by unperceived, he should never know it now, to laugh at it perhaps.

What if Louis Wilmot should betray her, for she knew he had discovered her secret! How she loathed him at that moment, knowing as she did too that he was smiling triumphantly at the display of feeling into which he had betrayed her.

“It is nevertheless true,” he said quietly; “but I am sorry that I have repeated anything that causes you such deep offence, Miss Gordon.”

Eleanor had recovered her self-possession now, and she replied distantly,—

“Not at all, Mr. Wilmot, you are mistaken. I was naturally surprised at such a flattering remark, but still more so that any gentleman should repeat what was not even meant for his own ear; but as it is perfectly indifferent to me whether such a thing was said at all or not, I do not care to prolong the conversation,” and she *did* look perfectly unconcerned as she swept past him out of the room.

But Louis Wilmot had gained his point; he had made her betray herself, and he could afford to smile at the way in which she ignored her curiosity to hear what Norman had said of her, reproaching *him* for repeating it. It might be useful to him if Eleanor Gordon's

love could be changed into hatred or desire for revenge.

When she left him, Eleanor went straight to the drawing-room, taking a seat apart from the rest of the company. In a moment or two Norman and Violet entered from the library. The former was at once drawn into a conversation with some gentlemen, and Violet came and sat near Eleanor, who turned to her in a few moments, saying in a low voice, which struck Violet as even colder than usual, as though Eleanor were forcing herself to politeness,—

“Violet, I have just heard of your engagement, and I must offer you my congratulations, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Eleanor; I was just going to ask if you knew.”

The thought of Violet's good fortune was too much for Eleanor just then, and there was a strange light in her eyes as she said,—

“I am afraid Mr. Ashleigh will make rather a jealous husband, do you know, Violet. He is so overbearingly haughty; excuse me for saying so plainly what I think.”

“He will never have occasion to be jealous,”

replied Violet proudly, "and you do not know Norman, or you could not speak of him like that. How can you take pleasure in saying such things of him to me?" and the indignant tears stood in Violet's eyes as she looked at Eleanor.

How could she bear calmly even a word against him who was the object of her heart's fond worship? But Eleanor only shrugged her shoulders, and relapsed into silence.

During the short remainder of the evening Norman behaved with coldness, almost bordering on contempt, to Louis Wilmot, and Violet, in her indignation against the latter for the words he had spoken to Norman, and seeing his character as she now did, could not show him her usual gentle though distant courtesy, but contrived to avoid him altogether. It was a real relief to her when Norman had promised not to notice what had occurred, for there had been such an evil expression on Mr. Wilmot's face as he spoke the offensive words to Norman that she dreaded anything leading to his further enmity.

The gay company were all gone at last, the brilliantly lighted rooms were already penetrated by the dawn, and the visitors

staying in the house were preparing to retire to their rooms.

“Good-night, grandmamma,” said Violet, as she kissed Mrs. Ashleigh.

“Good-morning, rather, Violet,” laughed Norman, who stood by her.

“She is so unused to dissipation, you see, Norman,” said his mother, “that she does not realize such hours. And are you *sure* you’ve enjoyed yourself, my love?”

“Indeed I have, grandmamma, haven’t I, Norman? You know I have had my share of dancing at least, don’t you?” and she looked up at him with a bright smile.

“Well, I really think you have, little Violet. And I think, mother, we kept our promise to you very well, for we have not once been jealous of one another during the evening,” and there was a tender light in Norman’s eyes as he looked at Violet.

Mrs. Ashleigh again took Violet’s hand, and in a low tone so that none should hear but Norman and Violet, she said,—

“My love, you will be my very own daughter soon now, and I cannot tell you the happiness and thankfulness that fill me when I think of it. Norman has told me that he has kept

nothing of the past from you, that he has told you *everything*, and I may tell you now, Violet, that you have brightened his life even from the first day he knew you. Though I hardly dared hope *this* happiness would result from it. Norman, I saw the new interest, the change that had taken possession of you, long ago, from the very first indeed. It must have been a very strong, deep love, to overcome the cold, stern resolution which I feared would *never* be broken. You will be very, very happy, Violet, my darling, for Norman loves you *very* truly."

"Pray that I may be to him all that he is to me, grandmamma, for I love him very, very much," whispered Violet, as she and Mrs. Ashleigh separated.

Nelly was already gone upstairs, and Norman took leave of Violet in a quiet part of the hall, where no prying eyes could witness the tender kiss exchanged between them, or the earnest pressure of Norman's grasp of the little hand soon to be that of his wife. Perhaps they were both thinking of the cold, distant "good-night" they had last exchanged, and the remembrance made the present happiness more precious still.

"Good-night, my darling, my precious Violet," whispered Norman, as he let her go at last.

Treasuring the fond words in her heart, wondering at her great, deep happiness, Violet went upstairs, feeling very little tired. How could she experience even any bodily weariness, with the joyful knowledge that the past painful doubt and separation were ended for ever! Norman loved her, how deeply she knew, and she would be his wife, his cherished companion until death!

"So you've come up at last, have you?" was Nelly's greeting. "To go to bed, I suppose, and dream, of course, of Mr. Ashleigh? Don't think I don't know who has kept you so long downstairs," and she nodded laughingly at Violet. "And you're sure you've enjoyed yourself? *I* have, I know, and I must really confess to being tired. Violet, what a splendid partner Mr. Ashleigh is, isn't he? But of course *you* think so; you're going to take him for life, you know."

Violet laughed as the happy blush rose to her face.

"And it is the more meritorious of him to be a good dancer, you know, Nelly, as he has had so little practice lately."

"Certainly," acquiesced Nelly. "Do you know, Violet, I am rather glad now that you told him all I said, though at the time I was rather afraid he would think me very foolish. I don't think he considers me so very flighty, after all."

"Indeed he does not, Nelly," was Violet's earnest reply.

"Well, you will have no excuse now for throwing your humble servant overboard, even when you are Mrs. Ashleigh. Don't be afraid, though, that I shall ever bore you with my friendship; I shall be very reasonable in my demands on you. By the way, what a very attractive way Mr. Ashleigh has, when he likes, of speaking kindly to one! I feel half inclined to envy you, after all, and it is not so wonderful that you think there is no one like him in the world. For your sake, though, I'll keep from falling in love with him; besides, I'd rather have my present free existence than the best love in Christendom, as I told papa this evening."

Violet kissed the laughing, pretty face.

"I'll remind you of this on a day that is sure to come, Nelly, darling," she said.

Nelly tossed her head with a pretty disdain.

"Nonsense! Ah, that reminds me I was right about Jessie Cameron; she came to me in raptures about Mr. Ashleigh, and I listened for a while, and then quietly told her he was engaged. She looked considerably disappointed, but coolly said it was no wonder; then I pointed you out to her, and she evidently thought you a fortunate creature. She very generously admired you, and said you and Mr. Ashleigh looked very well together. She'll very wisely forget all about him to-morrow, especially as it is such a hopeless case."

Violet smiled. Yes, she *was* fortunate, and no one knew it better than herself, for who could appreciate Norman as she did, she who was blessed with his love. As the two girls talked thus before going to sleep, Eleanor Gordon, in an adjoining room, freely indulged the storm of jealousy and hopeless fury which stirred her once calm, cold heart.

"If I could only console myself by thinking that he was marrying her for her fortune, anything but such love as I *must* see he has for her! Besides, what could he want with her money, he, the master of Ashleigh Court and its riches, even if it were in his nature to marry otherwise than for love? *How* has he

made such a fool of me as to make me madly in love with him, without *any* effort of his own ! Oh, I nearly hate him as I think of it, I who laughed at love and cared only to marry for position and wealth, to be conquered now by the fascination of Norman Ashleigh, whom I was resolved to dislike ! And all for nothing, but to see him marry Violet ! Well might she and his mother be afraid of my visiting Ashleigh Court, well may they still hold aloof from me ! He might have loved *me* if we had met sooner, and I might have been mistress of Ashleigh Court instead of Violet. And if I wanted, I could not do anything to injure her with him ; he believes in her so firmly, and living as they do, in the same house, seeing each other daily. And I *must* marry sometime, someone with whom I shall be wretched, whoever it is, because I cannot live singly, with my small fortune ; I *must* be rich, and there is no way but that. And to think that Louis Wilmot, whom I *hate*, knows, or at least suspects, my secret ! ” and tired, as she was, Eleanor lay awake for two [or three hours, until the sun streamed into her room, tossing and restless with her uneasy, evil thoughts.

Two days after the ball, the party at Windermere broke up, and Mrs. Ashleigh, Norman, and Violet went home once more together to Ashleigh Court, while Eleanor Gordon returned to London, accompanied by Mr. Wilmot, who was on his way still further south.

CHAPTER VI.

THEY were at home again, among the beloved scenes and familiar surroundings. Good old Mrs. Brownson had with tears in her eyes wished every blessing to her young master and his intended bride. And to Mrs. Arnott the news of the engagement had given real happiness too. She and her late husband had been among the very few who had known of Norman's trouble connected with Cécile du Fleur, and she had always felt a lively interest in him as her husband's friend. She had hoped for some time that this happy event might come to pass, and had perceived the signs of Violet's love in her very efforts to be cheerful and to speak carelessly of Norman during his absence in India. She had seen how deeply his image was ever in her heart, and had dreaded the pain that would fall on the sensitive spirit if it should prove that Norman cared not for her, for Mrs. Arnott felt that the interest and almost tenderness he

manifested for Violet might, after all, be only the marks of a kindly, brotherly affection, the more so as he had loved before and been so cruelly deceived.

“Violet,” she had said, after having wished them the first congratulations, “you see I am very selfish. I am thinking that now I shall always have your company, and that you and Norman must always be my dearest friends.”

And so the old life had come back again, and there were no tiresome lessons now to take Violet away from Norman. As they rambled together or rode side by side it seemed as though the past happiness had never been interrupted, only that now it was infinitely greater: for in the past they had been professedly but friends; now they were soon to be husband and wife, and an exquisite, tender confidence, such as they could not know of old, subsisted between them. There was no Louis Wilmot to gall Norman’s haughty spirit by his attentions to Violet, and no wonder that both felt the relief of his absence. It was long since Mrs. Ashleigh had felt so perfectly happy as now when she saw daily before

her, in their tender relation to each other, her idolized Norman and the young girl so dear to her. They sang and played together again every evening on the old piano, for Violet kept up her music very diligently under Norman's direction. She would often declare playfully, and yet with fond earnestness, that she was sure she played much better now than ever she had done when taught by a professional master, and Norman loved to hear the sweet flattery from her lips.

They were to be married on Violet's eighteenth birthday, in the ensuing February. She was very young, it was true, but not too young to love very deeply, so what more was required—why should they wait? And Norman pleaded so hard that the day might be delayed no longer than then, that Violet could not refuse him. So it was settled, and they were happy days, these, in which they looked forward to their coming union, knowing each other as few can do before marriage, with scarcely a fault or a virtue of the one hidden from the other, and with such perfect trust and confidence between them.

Many a time as Norman and Violet walked together down to the shore, as they passed the poor cottages and fishermen's huts, the inhabitants would come to the doors to look after them and invoke every happiness on their "handsome young Mr. Ashleigh and the sweet young lady, Miss Mortimer, who was to be his wife." Violet had a winning way of gaining these poor people's hearts and doing good for them.

She had none of the systematically benevolent young lady about her, she was too shy and sensitive for that; she paid them no regular visitations, nor would she have dreamt of obtruding advice upon them; but she had a way of listening to them, and talking with them, and helping them when she could in such a natural, graceful way as caused her to be exceedingly beloved. More than once, in passing, she would make Norman go into the cottages with her, knowing how proud the poor people felt when he did so. And, as he told his mother afterwards, he was amused and his admiration was excited by the way in which some poor woman had quite naturally poured out her troubles or happiness to Violet, who had

shown such a gentle interest in return. And he would fondly tease her about it herself, often saying,—

“Violet, these people’s affection for me rests principally, I fancy, on the fact that I am going to secure *you* to them.”

But Violet would not believe this, and would laughingly tell him not to be guilty of mock humility. As Violet thought over it all, as she often did during these blissful days, it seemed very strange that her life’s happiness was coming to her so early, and with such fulness, after her lonely, unloved childhood.

How evenly her life had flowed on since she came to Ashleigh Court! And this deep, deep joy, would it go on always, would nothing come to mar her happiness? More than once, as Norman read for them in the evenings, Violet would find herself listening to the rich tones of his loved voice more than to the words he was reading, and then, as she discovered it was so, the uneasy thought would come over her. Did she love Norman too much—was he too much the one thought of her heart? Something might come to separate them; perhaps her happiness was too full

and perfect for this world. Thousands were suffering and dying, even at no great distance from her peaceful home, and she had not a pain or a sorrow; love was all around her, and still greater happiness seemed near. And the fear paralysed her heart as she gazed at Norman's noble face, and she felt she *could* not bear it, if they were to be separated. How could she live without him, the object of her worshipping love? But what except death *could* come between them, and oh! surely that would not come yet!

Her childhood had been so sad and lonely; it must be that she was to be happy now. And the gloomy thoughts would vanish, like mist before the sunshine, as her buoyant heart refused to succumb to them. Then at other times Violet would experience a feeling of anxiety and responsibility amidst the happiness of knowing how soon she would be Norman's wife. She was very young, would she be able to make him as happy as he could make her, he who was so noble, so perfect in her eyes. Violet knew how he loved her, how precious she was to him; she knew the worth of the wealth of love she gave him; but her sensitive heart could not

resist these uneasy fancies. She always told Norman about them, as she told him everything, for he ever soothed away her difficulties.

“You’ll say I’m foolish, Norman, but I cannot help it,” she said, one day as she finished telling him what was troubling her.

Norman looked at her very earnestly for a moment, and then said, laughingly,—

“Why, Violet! Do you know, I’m seriously thinking of being angry? Has Nelly Woodford been trying to instil her anti-matrimonial ideas into you by her letters? If she has, I must write to her myself a long sermon on the subject;” then changing his tone to one of serious tenderness, and taking Violet’s hand into his, he went on, “My darling, you don’t understand yet how dear you are to me or you would never give way to such fears. If you could see my heart, how impatient it is for the day when I can call you my wife! What do you think I want? are you not giving me yourself? and I love you best just as you are. Ought not *I* to fear rather than you, because of my unreasonable, hasty temper, of which I have already given you experience, heaven forgive me! And

yet I don't fear, you see, because I have such trust in your love, and I *know* I can make you happy, with God's help, to the end. I don't feel afraid of ever willingly giving you a moment's pain in the future; *you* give me confidence by being so little afraid yourself of taking such a savage for your husband," and he smiled again. "My darling, do you remember that day long since that you named going away to school? You saw how opposed I was to it, but you did not know *all* I felt at the idea of your leaving us. If I felt it so much then, what would it be to lose you now? Oh, Violet! I could not bear it!" and Norman's voice grew strongly agitated.

"Norman, forgive me," Violet whispered; "I will promise never to think such things again. But you know I always tell you everything, and you send away all my silly ideas so well that I wonder how ever they could have come at all?"

"And I love to hear everything, even this. May I ever repay your confidence, little Violet. But," and he smiled once more, "you must own I had reason to be vexed a little at such an idea. I can see that that incorrigible Nelly wants to make you think

with her that marriage is a most alarming prospect, and all husbands unreasonable tyrants. She is coming here soon, is she not? I shall have to keep an eye on you both then, for Miss Nelly will be for running off with you safely out of my way."

"Indeed, Norman," laughed Violet, "you are too hard on Nelly. She does not take up her letters with writing on such things half as much as you fancy. We have plenty of secrets to write about that you know nothing of," and Violet looked with a mischievous glance into Norman's face.

"But, my dearest girl, I know perfectly well they are all *her* secrets, are they not? So I'm not the least miserable about them."

"Ah, but wouldn't you like to be quite sure, though? But I'm not going to tell you," and she tossed her head in merry defiance, and Norman owned it was no use begging to be told. Well he knew she had not a secret or a thought he did not share.

And when Nelly Woodford came to pay her promised visit to Violet, she could not complain that Norman deprived her of her friend's society in the least. She was in raptures with Ashleigh Court and everything

about it, not forgetting Mrs. Arnott. Norman often accompanied the two girls in their explorations, always asking Nelly's permission with a laughing irony which piqued her at first, but soon her remaining awe of him wore away, and, under Violet's influence, they became very good friends. They often indulged in good-humoured discussions, greatly to the amusement of Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet, when Nelly stoutly defended her favourite theories of independence and of the unreasonableness of men in general, which latter Norman bore with great equanimity. However, on the last evening of her visit, Nelly gave in so far as to say that he and Violet seemed so very happy at their prospects, and Violet was so obstinate in refusing to be the least doleful at the idea of being married, that it was perhaps not so dreadful, after all, and Violet might be right in the long run, and they might actually some day hear of her, Nelly, being converted from her present views, which concluding remark Norman received with polite triumph and an amused glance at Violet.

"Violet," Nelly said to her afterwards, very seriously, "you're a happy girl, and your

marriage will be such a one as we don't often see. You know each other so well, you and Mr. Ashleigh, you've loved each other so long, —don't blush, there's no need—and you will not feel the least strange or awkward when you're married. Loo and Charles will be a happy couple, but somehow, seeing the way you are loved and love back again would be nearer than anything to making me believe that I could be happier with a husband than without one."

Violet kissed her silently, with the happy love almost speaking from her soft eyes.

"No, there is no one like Norman in the world!" was the thought in her fond heart.

Since Violet and Eleanor had parted at Windermere, Eleanor's letters had become shorter and colder even than before, for it was terribly hard to have to write at all to her happy rival. Once or twice she had mentioned Mr. Wilmot, as having called on her and her mother, and so Violet knew that he was still in London. She and Norman had both hoped he was gone abroad again, for it would be pleasant to neither of them if he should pay another visit to the Lesters, their neighbours. It would be inexpressibly

galling to Norman to see Louis Wilmot even attempt to offer impertinent attentions to Violet, now that she was his own promised wife. And she, knowing this, devoutly hoped never to see Mr. Wilmot again, for it might be that he would take a pleasure in exasperating Norman and be revenged on herself by forcing his hated attentions upon her.

Now that Mrs. Ashleigh had seen more of Eleanor Gordon, she felt still less disposed to cultivate her acquaintance, especially as Violet would be so soon Norman's wife, and totally independent of Mrs. Mortimer.

The latter did not lead a happy life now with her daughter, the ungrateful Eleanor, whom she had so loved and indulged. Her health was beginning to fail, and she was no longer able to go into society as formerly ; but it often happened that she was forced to do so to satisfy Eleanor, who would not remain at home, and could not always go alone. Or when she had friends to accompany her, she would leave her mother alone, unwell as she often was, without a qualm. And Eleanor's absence had grown to be almost a relief to Mrs. Mortimer, for since her return from her visit to the Woodfords, her temper

had become to be often unbearable. Her mother was at a loss to discover the cause, for Eleanor was not very communicative as to her visit at Windermere, and though Mrs. Mortimer could not but suppose that something had occurred there which was a subject of annoyance to her, she never for a moment dreamt that it was anything connected with Norman Ashleigh. She was not keen enough to see through the apparent indifference and unconcern with which Eleanor spoke of him and his engagement to Violet. Eleanor had resolved long ago to dislike him, and her mother supposed that she now did so in reality.

Eleanor seemed possessed now of a continual necessity for gaiety and admiration; she could not remain quietly at home a single evening; she must have constant excitement to drown the mortified pride and love raging in her heart. The bitterness of the utter failure to win Norman Ashleigh, the thought of Violet being married before her and to the one too for whom she herself had laid aside her prejudice and pride, her rage at her utter powerlessness to be revenged, were the feelings that held unopposed possession of Eleanor's

mind. She hardly knew whether she loved or hated Norman, for selfish love like hers is very near akin to hatred, and at times hers was certainly the latter. And yet she felt an unrepressed desire for the presence which had fascinated her so strangely, and there was a wild, wicked wish in her heart to work mischief between Norman and Violet, even though no benefit should accrue from it to herself. No wonder that her fitful moods were hard to bear, now ill-humoured and peevish, then haughtily silent and totally inattentive to her mother, who was beginning to feel bitterly the effects of the bringing up she had given her daughter, and often indulged in weak, fretful reproaches to her. Whatever Mrs. Mortimer's faults, and they were very numerous, yet many of her failings in the past and much of her injustice to Violet had sprung from her inordinate, jealous affection for her own daughter, who now so ill repaid her. It was this knowledge that caused Mrs. Mortimer to reproach her vehemently one evening that she herself was unable to go out to some entertainment which Eleanor had promised herself they should attend, and must give up now because she could not go alone.

“You ungrateful girl!” said the poor weak mother, “it was all for you that I neglected Violet, because I could not bear to see you jealous. Many a time I might have been kinder to her but for fear of displeasing you. How often I have coveted her large fortune for you and dreaded to see that her appearance was growing such as many would prefer to your own! I see now how much wiser I should have been to have loved her and treated her as my own daughter. I *know* she would have behaved very differently to me from what you are doing, and she might never have gone away to Ashleigh Court at all. I heartily wish, Eleanor, you had married Mr. Bently; *that* was all broken off through your unbearable haughtiness, and if anyone ever does marry you now, I don’t envy him.”

Things had come to a pass when Mrs. Mortimer could speak in this way to Eleanor, whose only reply was a scornful curl of the lip as she rose and left the room, appearing no more that evening.

As has been said before, Mr. Wilmot had called two or three times at Westford House, on the strength of his acquaintance with Eleanor, who would, however, gladly have dispensed

with his visits. Mrs. Mortimer liked him because he flattered her and made himself agreeable, which was the more to be appreciated now that she was debarred from much visiting. Eleanor was secretly very much annoyed at her mother for encouraging Mr. Wilmot's acquaintance, since the presence of one who read her thoughts so well as he did could not fail to be irksome and mortifying to her.

However, he seemed determined to remain in London for the present, and to have time and money both at his disposal, though her knowledge of his possession of the latter did not prevent Eleanor from being convinced that he had sought Violet for her fortune as certainly as he was convinced of her own passion for Norman Ashleigh.

CHAPTER VII.

It was but three weeks from the day which was fixed as the wedding day. Norman was going into Lincolnshire for a fortnight on business connected with his property there, and would consequently return home only a week before his marriage, after which he and Violet were going abroad for a short tour. They had both received congratulatory letters from India, from Mrs. Lacy, containing also favourable accounts of her own health, and hearty wishes that she could be present on the happy occasion of her dear Norman's marriage. The Woodfords were coming over to Ashleigh Court, with the exception of Louisa, whose own wedding had recently taken place, and Nelly was to be Violet's bridesmaid.

The day before Norman went away he and Violet took a ride together to a favourite spot, a long distance off, among the hills. How well afterwards Violet remembered that

ride on the bright, clear January morning, when happiness was so close around her, and the hardest trial she had was the thought of Norman's temporary absence, to commence on the morrow! And when they reached home again, and Norman had assisted Violet to dismount, she stood for a minute patting Charley's glossy neck. Norman gazed fondly down on her girlish figure, looking so graceful in the long riding habit.

"Most likely I shall not ride again to the Hollow until I can have my little wife by my side," he said.

Then from under her hat Violet looked up softly as the blush overspread her happy face; but as Norman would have taken her hand, she escaped from him with a sudden playfulness, and ran with a joyous laugh into the house, while he stood looking after her with a tender smile.

He went away the next day, and once again Violet and Mrs. Ashleigh were alone together, waiting this time for the happy day which was to see a still nearer tie exist between them. Mrs. Ashleigh had felt bound to invite Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor to be present at Violet's wedding, though their company

would be so uncongenial ; and Mrs. Mortimer, unwell as she was, was determined to accept the invitation, and be received at last at Ashleigh Court. A strange mixture of joy and bitterness filled Eleanor's heart at the prospect of meeting Norman again. She knew that to stand by and see him married to Violet, and to behold the latter's happiness, would be maddening agony, that it might confirm for ever the hatred into which even now her love was often changed ; but she would not deny her insane longing for his presence, and her desire that he should look again upon her beauty, and perhaps be forced inwardly to recall those words overheard by Louis Wilmot, which still so rankled in her remembrance.

The days were passing happily with Mrs. Ashleigh and Violet, in the long delicious chats they had together of the future, which seemed so bright a prospect.

Violet looked forward with a trembling joy to the day that was so near now, the day which would make her Norman's wife, his very own, for as long as life should last. She would often, with playful earnestness, bid Mrs. Arnott take great care of

“grandmamma” while she and Norman were away.

“You may be sure I will, Violet,” Mrs. Arnott answered. “You know you will have to use a dearer name even than ‘grandmamma’ very soon to Mrs. Ashleigh, my love.”

“Norman is always telling me I ought to begin beforehand, to get used to it!” replied Violet one day, with the low, happy laugh so often heard from her now.

Alas! how little they had all thought, when Norman left home, under what circumstances he would return.

He had been gone about a week when Mrs. Ashleigh took cold and felt generally unwell, so that she kept all day to her room. She made light of the indisposition to Violet, not wishing to alarm her; but she could not divest herself of the idea that she was going to be seriously ill. Violet, with her, fond accustomed care, would not leave her, but remained with her all day, to cheer and amuse her, and to bestow love’s thousand little attentions upon her. But when, the next day, Mrs. Ashleigh was no better, the physician was sent for who had attended her for years,

and who had been present at her husband's death-bed. Violet followed him from Mrs. Ashleigh's room, thinking he looked serious, in spite of his assumed cheerfulness, and asked him very anxiously if Mrs. Ashleigh "would not soon be well."

The doctor looked with a kind smile at the earnest eyes looking up to him, and replied, with a fatherly grasp of Violet's hand,—

"Make yourself easy, my dear Miss Mortimer; Mrs. Ashleigh will be quite well, even to preside at your wedding breakfast, and that is very near now, isn't it?"

Violet smiled amid her blushes, and he added,—

"Mrs. Ashleigh is unwell certainly, and looks very ill to you; but at her age, you know, sickness is not so lightly got over as it would be by a young person."

So that when Violet wrote to Norman that day and mentioned his mother's indisposition, she bade him not to be the least alarmed, for she would be up again to welcome him home. But when a day more passed, and Mrs. Ashleigh was no better, Violet could not conceal her anxiety from

Norman when writing to him, and his next letter announced his intention of coming home in a day or two. He could not feel easy away from home while his mother was in such a low, weak state. Mrs. Ashleigh smiled on learning his intention.

"Poor Norman! I shall scold him for being so easily alarmed," she said; but Violet saw that she longed now for his coming, and she herself cherished hopes that Norman's presence would hasten his mother's recovery.

Violet's fond anxiety kept her continually at Mrs. Ashleigh's side, making her dear protectress often ask her where she had learnt to be such a good little nurse.

"Between you and Norman and the doctor, I shall be quite myself by the 22nd. It would never do, my love, for me to look the least ill on that happy day."

And Violet's loving heart echoed the wish with intensity; but there were moments when an undefined fear crossed her mind as she fancied the doctor looked grave and anxious, and she began to count the hours to Norman's return.

The night before he was expected home

Mrs. Ashleigh had persuaded Violet to go to her own room for a good rest, and she was soundly asleep, when at an early hour she was suddenly awakened by Mrs. Brownson, who seemed in great agitation.

"Miss Mortimer, I knew I ought to come to you. My mistress has been taken suddenly worse, and I am afraid she is very ill. I have sent for Dr. Carlton to come at once."

"Oh, Mrs. Brownson!" gasped Violet, as with clasped hands she sat up quite still for a minute, trembling violently. Then the housekeeper helped her to dress in haste, and in a few minutes more she was again close by her dear guardian's bedside, clasping the burning hands and seeing in speechless agony the change that had in truth taken place for the worse.

Almost at the same moment with the doctor, Mrs. Arnott arrived, for a message had been sent to her too, as the housekeeper knew what a comfort she would be to Violet. It was as they had feared. Mrs. Ashleigh's illness had taken a dangerous turn, and the doctor could not conceal even from herself that she was seriously ill,

but bade them still not lose hope. Mrs. Ashleigh was very calm, now that she knew the worst. Something told her that death was summoning her, that she would never again rise from her bed, that she would not look upon the union of the two dear ones she must leave behind. Feeling as one stunned and powerless, Violet detained the doctor downstairs a moment. Her hands were clasped, and he could see their tremulous motion as she stood before him.

“Then there is really danger?” she asked quickly, in a low, hoarse voice.

The doctor looked at her very kindly as he replied,—

“My dear Miss Mortimer, I must not deceive you; there is danger, and you must telegraph at once to Mr. Ashleigh. He must return immediately. I believe he was not coming until to-morrow night?”

Almost mechanically, Violet wrote the words of the telegram to Norman,—

“Come home at once; Mrs. Ashleigh is very ill, but not past hope.”

Then she gave the paper to Dr. Carlton, who went immediately to send it off, after a few encouraging words to Violet.

When she was alone, she stood for a moment trying to realize the sorrow that she knew was coming. Three days ago all had looked so bright and happy, and now, Mrs Ashleigh, that dear, kind, ever-watchful guardian, lay ill, perhaps dying! How would Norman bear it? For a dear mother's place can never be filled, was the thought in Violet's heart, as a wild prayer for dear grandmamma's life rose from it.

As she sat down again by her bed, Mrs. Ashleigh spoke to her.

"You have sent for Norman, my love? Violet, I am going to leave you, I feel it is so, my darling. I little thought I should never see you Norman's wife; I should have wished to live to see it; but it is God's will that I should be taken away now, and I have been blessed with great happiness all during my life, so I must not murmur. You must be all in all to one another, Violet, you and Norman," and she stopped exhausted.

Violet's self-control had given way completely now, and with an agony of tears she sobbed out,—

"Grandmamma! do not talk like that! You must not die! We cannot spare you,

our dear mother. You shall get better, grand-mamma, oh ! say you will ! ”

Mrs Arnott gently drew the weeping girl away, and whispering that perfect quiet might be life to Mrs. Ashleigh, she succeeded in calming Violet, who still would insist on remaining to be Mrs. Ashleigh's nurse as far as possible. She and Mrs. Arnott hardly knew how they got through that weary day of alternate fear and hope. But despite all remedies, Mrs. Ashleigh grew worse, and near midnight Norman arrived, having travelled all day, chafing at every stoppage. Violet went downstairs alone to meet him as he entered the house. He was paler even than usual, and the anxious expression stamped on his face told more than words how heavily this unexpected sorrow had fallen, for he had already learnt from the servants that his mother was worse. He clasped Violet silently in his arms, and there was consolation and relief in his protecting embrace. How little thought of sorrow they had had when they had parted so few days before ! How little had they thought that the dear mother who was to have given her happy blessing to their union would never witness it !

“Oh, Norman!” broke from Violet at last, and the one word expressed all the pent up feeling in her heart.

“My poor darling! how pale and tired you look! I can see you have been constantly with my mother, Violet.”

“How could I be else, Norman? Do you think they should have taken me away from her to-day for a moment until now?”

“God bless you, my darling;” and Norman looked down on her with untold tenderness. “Is Dr. Carlton here now, Violet?” he asked, as they went upstairs together.

“Oh, yes; do you wish to see him first?”

“No, no; I must see my mother at once, Violet;” then in a low voice he asked, “Is it true that *no* improvement has taken place?”

“They say so; but oh, Norman, I can’t believe it! She *must* get better now that you are come home!” and as Norman met her gaze, so full of confidence and trust, he took both the little, trembling hands within his own.

They were soon in Mrs. Ashleigh’s room, and with Violet still by his side, Norman stood by what he feared too surely was his

mother's dying bed. When at last he tore himself away, he went apart with Dr. Carlton to ask him if his mother's danger were really so imminent, conjuring him to save her. But the doctor was fast losing hope, and, however painful the task, thought it his duty to tell Norman the truth, that he feared it was but too certain that Mrs. Ashleigh's illness would terminate fatally.

He and the other physician whom he had called in had done all that was possible ; but the end was coming. Mrs. Ashleigh might live a day or two, but scarcely longer. And as he spoke, the doctor wrung Norman's hand in sympathy ; well he knew how he loved his mother, for he had seen him grow up from boyhood, he had heard his father's dying charge to be a good son to the mother who now lay dying in her turn, and he knew how well the childish promise had been kept. Norman, in his proud manhood, was not ashamed of the tear that escaped him in the presence of his old friend, wrung from him by the sad truth that had come so suddenly upon him. As he re-entered the bedroom he was met by Mrs. Arnott, who whispered as she stopped him,—

“Norman, we want you to make Violet go to bed for a little while. She was up so early this morning, and has scarcely left your mother once to-day. She will be ill with fatigue, in the present grief; but we cannot persuade her to leave. But if you ask her, Norman, if you tell her you wish it, she will consent.”

“I will do so at once, Mrs. Arnott. I had already intended it. My poor Violet!”

Telling Violet Norman wished to speak to her, Mrs. Arnott took her place by Mrs. Ashleigh.

Norman drew Violet towards him as he whispered,—

“You will promise to do something I am going to ask you, won’t you, Violet?”

Instinctively she knew what he was going to say.

“Oh, Norman, don’t ask me to leave her! I cannot!” and she looked up earnestly.

“God bless you, my darling, for your devotion and love to my mother! But you are making yourself ill, Violet, and I cannot bear that in addition. You will be the better able for your loving labours to-morrow if you take a little rest now. So you must indeed do so; I wish it very much, and you will not refuse

me, Violet? I promise you you shall be called if the least change takes place."

Mrs. Arnott was right. Norman prevailed where the others had failed. Violet could not resist the earnest request of him she loved, and would one day promise to obey through life. She knew he would keep his promise to her of letting her know if any change came.

"I will go, Norman," she said, as she looked up. "You will tell her?"

"Thank you, my own Violet," and Norman's look of love repaid her for her acquiescence.

It was a long time before Violet could sleep; but at last, overcome by sorrow and fatigue, she was soothed into forgetfulness by a heavy slumber. Norman remained all night by his mother's side, despite her entreaties for him to rest. Mrs. Ashleigh was calm and resigned amidst the pain of her sickness and the sorrow of beholding the grief surrounding her. The consolations of religion enabled her to meet death and to leave earth, with its dear ones, with resignation and without a murmur. All hope was gone now, and she lay awaiting the final summons.

Violet came again to Mrs. Ashleigh's side

as the morning advanced, refreshed by her sleep, short as it had been. All through the weary day she and Norman stayed with the dear one, soon to be numbered with the dead. Violet controlled her grief, so as not to disturb Mrs. Ashleigh, though it was at times too great an effort for her bursting heart. It was so dreadful to read the sorrowing letters from anxious friends, especially those of the Woodfords, who had written so lately in such a different strain, in the confident anticipation of a joyful meeting.

It had been a hard struggle for Eleanor Gordon to conceal even in her letter her triumphant satisfaction at the delay which must take place before Violet's marriage in case of Mrs. Ashleigh's death.

She knew also that Violet would have to return to London in such an event, to find a home again with herself and Mrs. Mortimer; and much as Eleanor hated Violet's company, she rejoiced at the prospect of often seeing Norman, which would of course be entailed by it. And already she began to look forward vaguely to the chance which might be given her of being revenged on Violet when their home should again be one.

But Violet, unconscious of Eleanor's malignity, read her letter, with its somewhat cold expressions of sympathy, and as she did so, the woful truth that Mrs. Ashleigh was dying, and that she must soon go back to the old London life, came over her with crushing force, and she wept freely. The day wore on, and the weather grew wild and stormy, fitting to be the accompaniment of death. From her bedroom window Violet could see the ocean lashed to fury, while dark, threatening clouds overhung the hills and the wind moaned sadly as it swept over the garden, bending the leafless trees with its strength. She had come to her room for a few minutes, and as she lingered looking out into the dusk, how she recalled the happy day when, arrayed in summer's smiling garb, the scene, so gloomy and deserted now, had first greeted her eyes! And below, dear grandmamma lay dying only too surely! As Violet re-entered the room, Norman motioned her to approach the bed, and made her sit down by him. Mrs. Ashleigh smiled faintly as she looked tenderly at them. She seemed to have gained a temporary strength as she spoke to them.

"Violet, my love, I have told Norman that

I wish to speak a few words to you both before my voice fails me. I have no pain now, but the end is very near. Do not go," she said to Mrs. Arnott, who was about to leave the bedside; "you have been a dear friend to us, and I have nothing to say you may not hear. Norman, tell Violet of Mrs. Arnott's kindness, and my great thankfulness for it.

Norman took Violet's trembling hands as he whispered,—

"Mrs. Arnott wishes to have you with her, Violet, until I can bring you home here again."

"Promise to come to me, Violet, until you are Norman's wife," and Mrs. Arnott looked earnestly at Violet, who thanked her by the eloquent expression of her soft eyes, and they saw she consented.

"I shall die happy now," Mrs. Ashleigh continued; "you and Norman will be near each other still, Violet; Mrs. Mortimer will not claim you, my love—I think not. I should like to have lived to see Violet your wife, Norman, I had thought to be so happy with you; but it is God's will that it should not be. Do not let my death separate you long; it is my wish that you should be united very

soon ; and on the day that you become husband and wife, remember how I wished to bless you, how happy I should have been——”

She paused, and seeing the intense grief, too deep for utterance, depicted on Norman's face, she continued,—

“ You will miss me, Norman, my dear, dear son, but do not grieve too long for me. Always remember that you have never caused me an hour's sorrow, that you have been more to me than I dared hope when I used to hold you in my arms and think of the future. You have kept your promise well, Norman.”

“ My dear mother ! ” burst from Norman, as he gazed on the dear face, so soon to be still in death. The memory of his boyhood, and the ever watchful love and care of this beloved parent, her fondness, only increasing as he advanced in years, the thought of the close sympathy and confidence which had ever been between them, came over Norman, and the tears, so precious and so rare, which come from the depths of a man's heart, proud and strong as his was, fell freely from his eyes, and if it had been possible for Violet's love for her future husband to have become

greater, it would have been so from that moment when she saw him shed tears for the first time, by the dying bed of his mother. Softly she drew closer to him, and he took her right hand within his own. Mrs. Ashleigh saw the action and smiled tenderly.

“It is so I would bless you, my dear children. From the day that unites you, be all the world to each other. Love Violet as your very soul, Norman, cherish and protect her from every harm; and, Violet, you will love and honour him in return—I know you will be such a wife to him as he deserves. Let no one ever come between you, through life have entire confidence and trust in each other, and always remember that you have both made me very happy.”

She paused now, for her voice was going fast.

At a sign from Norman, Violet called Dr. Carlton, and for nearly an hour Mrs. Ashleigh lay in a kind of half-conscious doze. She had that afternoon received all the last religious consolations, and now only waited the final summons. As night drew on it was evident that the last moment was fast approaching, and Norman gently raised his mother, so that

her pillow rested on his arm and his other hand clasped hers. Shortly before midnight Mrs. Ashleigh fixed her eyes with a last loving glance on Violet's face, then lifting them to Norman's, as she rested in his arms, she kept her tender gaze there until her eyes closed softly and the last sigh came forth, and they saw she was no more. Gently Norman kissed his mother's now lifeless lips, and withdrawing his arm, laid the still form back upon the bed.

Violet could restrain her pent up grief no longer; she looked for a moment upon the dead face, and then falling on her knees by the bedside, she buried her face in her hands and wept passionately. Mrs. Arnott left the room quietly with the doctor and Mrs. Brownson, so that Norman and Violet might be alone with the beloved dead.

Norman resumed his place by the bed, and leaning his head on his hand, he let Violet give way to her grief undisturbed, and thus they watched by the dear one whose loss they could not yet realize. At last Norman rose, and going to Violet, who still knelt with her face hidden, though her weeping had become quieter, he gently put his arm around her,

and at his touch she raised her head and looked up.

“Let me take you downstairs,” he whispered; and she rose, and they both looked again upon the calm face. As though awed by the presence of death, which had taken away one so loved, Violet clung to Norman’s arm, and let him lead her downstairs. They went into the breakfast-room, which Violet had hardly entered since she and Mrs. Ashleigh last sat there together. As the remembrance came over her so forcibly, Violet shivered violently, and Norman made her lie on the sofa near the fire, and sat down by her side. She held his hand very fast, as though she feared he too might leave her.

Neither of them could speak for a few minutes; it had all seemed so sudden, so overwhelming, coming too in the midst of such joyous anticipations. Neither of them could realize yet that the dear familiar form would soon be hidden from their sight, that the beloved mother would move about no more in the accustomed places, that she was taken away, and they would hear her voice no more.

“Norman,” said Violet at last, “I am very

selfish. I am letting you try to console me, and I can do nothing for *you*. But who could comfort you for her loss, Norman!" and the tearful eyes looked tenderly up to his face, so pale in its mute sorrow.

"My darling! my mother died happily, knowing she left me you. You are all my world now, little Violet;" and there was a new and indescribable tenderness in his voice as he spoke the endearing appellation.

Yes, they were all the world to each other more than ever now, and during these moments Violet thought with renewed thankfulness of Mrs. Arnott's kindness. She could not have borne to go back to London to Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, so far away from Norman, even for a time.

As they sat there together, Mrs. Arnott came into the room, and seeing how pale and exhausted Violet looked, she pressed her to take some wine. Violet was but little inclined to do so; but it was Norman's hand that poured it out for her, and offered her the glass as he begged her to take it, and she could not refuse him. Then she consented to go to her own room with Mrs. Arnott, that they might both try to get a little rest,

and Norman pressed the weary, trembling form to his heart as he bade her "good-night."

As they reached Violet's room, Mrs. Arnott whispered,—

"You must try to sleep, my love, and keep yourself well, for Norman's sake. He has only you now, Violet, and once you are his wife, you can be much more to him than even his dear mother ever could."

And so Violet slept, with her hand in Mrs. Arnott's, finding happiness for a time in dreams of Norman, and of grandmamma being still alive, of her own wedding day, and of Nelly dressed as her bridesmaid. Then it all changed to nearer the reality, and she was gazing at dear grandmamma in her coffin, when the shock awoke her, to find Mrs. Arnott still asleep by her side. Mrs. Arnott was to remain at Ashleigh Court until after the funeral, when she would take Violet home with her. In her letter to Mrs. Mortimer, telling of Mrs. Ashleigh's death, Violet asked her stepmother's consent to this arrangement; and Norman wrote also, stating that it had been his mother's last wish that Violet should accept Mrs. Arnott's kindness. He concluded by asking Mrs. Mor-

timer's consent, which, however, he considered merely as a matter of form, as he did not dream that Mrs. Mortimer would dispute the arrangement.

The days passed very, very sadly now at Ashleigh Court the few days that intervened before Mrs. Ashleigh's funeral. Every moment and at every turn those she had left behind were reminded with painful vividness of their loss, never to be replaced.

Poor Mrs. Brownson was completely overwhelmed with grief.

"I can't believe she's gone, Miss Mortimer," she said to Violet; "but when I look at her as she lies upstairs, I feel somehow as if I could not be long after her. Except for Mr. Norman and you, miss, for I think you'd rather see me in the old place than a stranger."

Violet placed her hand in that of the faithful old servant, "*Indeed* we would, Mrs. Brownson," she whispered with earnest warmth.

"God bless you, miss. May the day come quickly when my young master brings you home here again, to be our mistress. Mrs. Ashleigh wished it to be soon, miss;

she told me so. Alas! we never thought she would not live to see it!"

Violet could not answer, the sorrow was so fresh and sore in the loving heart which clung so fondly to the memory of the dead. With soft tread and hushed voice Violet moved about the house where so lately her buoyant step and low, musical laugh or joyous song had gladdened the heart of the dear one who now lay dead, insensible to either happiness or sorrow. Violet had feared and dreaded sorrow in her complete happiness, and it had fallen now, only too surely!

In the sad evenings, as she and Norman with Mrs. Arnott sat together (not in Mrs. Ashleigh's own little sitting-room; they could not have borne that so soon), Violet's grief would master her completely, and she would weep out on Norman's shoulder her tears for his mother, so soon to have been her own too. Once a day she went with him to visit the peaceful remains of her beloved protectress. He did not like her to go oftener, as he did himself, for he saw how it always renewed her grief, and he feared the effect upon her sensitive frame; and she

felt it was the best tribute of love she could render to his mother, to obey his wishes.

Major and Mrs. Woodford came to Ashleigh Court to pay the last mark of respect to their lamented friend by being present at her funeral. How little they had imagined their intended visit would be such as this, but a few days before! Together Norman and Violet took their last look of the calm face of her they had lost, before the coffin lid was closed upon it, and it was terribly painful for the young man to restrain his own powerful emotion and support the trembling form by his side. The late fatigue and yearning sorrow had so unnerved Violet that Norman took her in his arms and carried her half fainting from the room, that she might not hear the sound which shut out for ever the sight of the familiar face.

Mrs. Ashleigh's loss would be the more keenly felt as there had been none of the painful infirmities of approaching age or its selfishness about her. Hers had been such a beautiful old age, that only the fondest, sweetest remembrance would dwell in the hearts of those who loved her, of her venerable, cheerful aspect, so suddenly taken from their midst.

They buried her by her husband's side in the family vault of the church she had so long attended. As the sorrowing party returned to Ashleigh Court, Norman was met at the hall door by Violet, who handed him a letter which had come during his absence. He saw at once that it was from Mrs. Mortimer.

"You have had one also, of course, Violet?"

"No," she answered.

He put the letter unopened in his pocket, and they passed on into the drawing-room with Major Woodford. When there, Norman went apart, and Violet watched him as he read Mrs. Mortimer's letter, rather a long one, as it appeared. An expression of pain and annoyance passed over his face as he read it, and somewhat impatiently replacing it in his pocket, he joined the rest, but did not, as Violet had expected, speak to her about the letter. What had Mrs. Mortimer said? Surely she had not demurred about giving her consent to her remaining with Mrs. Arnott.

The fear made Violet feel nervous and anxious, and she wished with a feverish longing that Norman would speak to her

soon of his letter, for she was to go home with Mrs. Arnott that evening. She saw during the next hour that some new trouble was disturbing Norman, and more than once found his gaze fixed earnestly upon herself. At last he came towards her.

“Violet, will you come into the library? I want to speak to you,” he said, and as she rose he turned to the Woodfords and Mrs. Arnott, “Will you excuse us for a little while?”

He and Violet left the room, and as soon as they were alone in the library, Norman gave her Mrs. Mortimer’s letter, telling her to read it.

It began by expressions of condolence for Mrs. Ashleigh’s death, in which she said that Eleanor desired to join, and then went on to the subject of Violet’s remaining with Mrs. Arnott. She was surprised, she wrote, that such an arrangement had been made without first consulting her, especially as it was one she certainly could not consent to.

“I have not the pleasure of Mrs. Arnott’s acquaintance,” she wrote; “but I thank her for her proffered kindness to Violet, which I must nevertheless decline. I am now my

stepdaughter's sole guardian, and her home must be with me until her marriage, which will, of course, not take place until a suitable time has elapsed. Violet does not conceal that she herself would prefer remaining with Mrs. Arnott; but she will, I am sure, not hesitate to lay aside her own wish at my bidding. She knows that my health is now very bad, and I shall look to her for a daughter's care, and there is nothing to prevent her being happy while she is with me. I cannot say my own daughter fulfils her duty to me; she is constantly visiting from home, and is totally unfit to render the care I require. You will see, then, that it is just now that I am in need of Violet, and it is her duty to come to me."

The letter went on in this strain, selfish and inconsiderate, and as if the writer were determined to assert her authority. Violet might remain a few days with Mrs. Arnott to make her preparations, and then Mrs. Mortimer would expect her in London, and she requested that Violet would write to name the day and hour when she would arrive.

As Violet read her stepmother's letter, she

well knew how galling to Norman must have been its inconsiderate, dictatorial tone. She turned to him with a sensation of weary pain, and he drew her close to his breast.

"Oh, Norman!" she whispered.

"My darling! if you were but my wife already, and then she could have no pretence of authority over you! She shall not take you away, Violet!" he exclaimed, passionately.

But Violet gently disengaged herself from his embrace and stood by him, mastering her emotion.

"Norman," she said gently, "she is right, after all; I must go to her as she wishes. I must obey *her* until—I am your wife, Norman," and the beautiful eyes looked up into his face.

He knew that she was right, that he must yield, that they could not resist Mrs. Mortimer's authority as yet, however his heart chafed against his powerlessness to prevent her taking Violet away from him.

"What does she want?" he asked. "Does she think to make you spend your time in attending to her caprices? She showed you no love in the past, that she should expect

yours now. But do what she will, she shall not keep you from me long, my darling. She shall understand from me that it will be useless to attempt to prevent our marriage taking place as soon as my mother wished."

And as she heard him Violet felt that her weak stepmother, on knowing Norman, would hardly care to attempt to resist his strong will.

And so there was no help for it. Spite of Mrs. Arnott's vehement regret, the Woodfords' sympathy, and even Norman's sorrow and indignation, Violet must go, in all the fresh soreness of her grief, back to the old London life, far away from Ashleigh Court and all she loved for a time. That was the saving thought, for a *time* only, and a short one too, Norman firmly declared. Mrs. Ashleigh had made them promise to put off their marriage no longer than four months, as they would not consent to a shorter interval.

"By my death," she had said, "you must become even more to each other. Violet will need your tender protection more than before, Norman, and you will be so lonely without her always near you. I should like best that you should remember me together; I cannot bear to think of you as separate long."

And knowing how, now that Violet must go away so far during the period of separation, his mother would have been even more earnest in her request, Norman made Violet promise before she left Ashleigh Court that evening that she would become his wife in four months from her eighteenth birthday.

"I cannot let you stay with Mrs. Mortimer longer than that, my darling," he said.

This temporary separation would be all the more keenly painful to Norman because he knew that Violet was going into such an unloved and unloving home, in all the freshness of her grief for his mother.

He had been so accustomed to have Violet entirely to himself and to the delicious pleasure of seeing how her happiness was so bound up with her present home, so that she cared for nothing beyond, that he was ill able to bear the idea of her being away from him among those unloving ones who could not sympathize with her, and evidently intended to make her useful to themselves and monopolize her time and attention. And Louis Wilmot was still in London. Norman knew that he occasionally visited Mrs. Mortimer, and his heart chafed indignantly at the

thought that Violet might be again exposed to his impertinent attentions. Violet, who was so nearly his wife, who had been so secured by his own exclusive presence and their retired home from any attention or admiration from others, to be launched again into the world of London, where he would seldom be at hand to shield her from annoyance and unkindness !

Violet left Ashleigh Court that evening with a heart filled with sadness almost to overflowing. How soon would she return ? was the question prompted by her anxious forebodings. But she tried to keep up her spirits, for Norman's sake, knowing his distress. How tenderly he had upheld her during the grief of the last few days. *She* would be brave now in turn, not to cause him more sorrow. She shed a few tears that night in Mrs. Arnott's arms as they sat together, and Mrs. Arnott spoke her sorrow that she might not stay with her, but after that she was quiet and tearless. She wrote the next day to Mrs. Mortimer to signify her obedience to her wishes, and fixed the day after her birthday for her arrival in London. Norman was going to take her there himself, and Violet mentioned this in her letter, little

suspecting the tumult of conflicting emotions the intelligence would raise in Eleanor's heart.

All too quickly passed the few days that intervened before Violet's departure. With Mrs. Arnott's assistance she quietly made her preparations for going away from the beloved scenes, the lonely seashore and the breezy beautiful hills. She went to visit her friends among the cottages to bid them a temporary farewell. She had not visited them since Mrs. Ashleigh's illness, and the remembrance of the last time she had been amongst them was almost too much for Violet, especially when her humble friends shed honest tears for "the dear lady who was taken away," and poured out their earnest wishes that she herself would very soon return to Ashleigh Court as its mistress. And Norman and Violet did not avoid speaking to each other of their beloved dead, for there was no bitterness in their grief, all pervading as it was. And during life's journey, which they were soon to begin together, Mrs. Ashleigh's love and blessing would ever remain, a precious legacy, with her dear son and his wife whom she had loved as a daughter.

It came to Violet's eighteenth birthday, the

day before her departure for London, the day which was to have given them such happiness, which was to have been their wedding day. Norman had walked with Violet down to the seashore, soon to be exchanged by the latter for the bustling city, the genteel, unlovely street, and the uncongenial atmosphere of Westford House. She was going to take her temporary farewell of Ashleigh Court, its servants, and its dear, familiar rooms and now leafless gardens. With Norman by her side she said good-bye to poor Charley, and lingeringly stroked his silky neck. He was to remain under Norman's care, for Violet could not have him in London. She sighed as she turned from him at last. Before she could see him again she would be Norman's wife; would it really be so soon as they hoped?

The shivering, undefined grief, born of her sorrow, came over her again, and her soft eyes rested on Norman's face with a yearning gaze. Then she wandered through the house, lingering in the rooms specially hallowed by dear grandmamma's late presence, with a pang convulsing her fond heart. She was gone; never more would they sit together,

never more would they listen together to Norman's music. She was gone, that dear, dear friend who had taken her from her unloving home and brought her to her own, taking her to her heart at the same time and surrounding her with happiness. She was gone, and they were alone now, she and Norman. Something of this thought was in Norman's mind too, for as she stood by him he drew her to him and held her fast within his arms.

"Would that you were my wife already, Violet!" and there was a strange agitation in his voice as he spoke.

Would that she were, echoed the young heart, as Violet rested in the embrace of him who loved her with all the protecting tenderness of a brother joined to the jealous fervour of a lover's passion. As they passed Rupert Ashleigh's portrait, Violet paused to look at it, remembering that grandmamma had first told her its history. Norman smiled. He knew how strongly Violet saw the likeness to himself in this picture.

"Why do you like this picture so much, better than my own portraits, Violet?"

"I don't know, but I always liked it, somehow. It is so like you, Norman."

"But surely I am not so stern-looking as that?" and he smiled sadly.

"Oh, no, but you can look that way sometimes," and she looked up gently.

"But not to you, my darling, ever since—that day I was so cruel," and he seemed troubled, but the little hand sought his as she whispered earnestly,—

"No, never to me, never since you told me you loved me. And oh, Norman! never do, I could not bear it!"

Norman looked down at her with yearning tenderness, and he pressed the little hand silently. It was growing dark as they left the house and passed through the bare, wintry garden.

"When shall I come back!" was Violet's yearning thought as Norman opened the gate.

"I shall be very, very lonely, my darling, until next I open this gate for you," he said, and they walked together down the road to Mrs. Arnott's.

CHAPTER VIII.

AND so on the day following that which was to have been their wedding day, Norman and Violet journeyed together to London. Violet's heart was sadly heavy as they left behind them the hills and valleys and peaceful lakes of Cumberland, and drew nearer and nearer to the vast world of London, the thought of which jarred painfully on her sorrowing spirit. She had resolved to do her duty to her step-mother, to try and win her affection, if possible, but even to her generous, forgiving heart the prospect of the next four months was a weary one, fraught with undefined foreboding. She and Norman were alone during the latter part of the journey, but both spoke little, oppressed by the unspoken emotion in their hearts.

They reached London, and before Violet could realize it, they were driving to Westford House. Norman kept Violet's hand in his all during that drive through the busy streets,

so different from the scenes they had left, as though he would keep her to himself until the last moment. As they stopped before the house, the sight brought so vividly to Violet's mind the remembrance of the day she had left it under Mrs. Ashleigh's protection, that she became agitated, and Norman felt her hand tremble in his grasp. He assisted her very gently from the cab, and in a few moments they were sitting in the dining-room, where Mrs. Mortimer waited to receive them. She was full of pleasure to "make Mr. Ashleigh's acquaintance," she said, adding that she could not properly express her sympathy with the sorrow which had been the means of their meeting. Norman received her warm greeting with easy deference, but her manner jarred upon his refined, exclusive nature, knowing too as he did her selfishness and former injustice to Violet. To the latter she was so affectionate as to surprise her completely, telling her how much she had longed for her coming.

"I am so lonely, you know, my dear. Eleanor is sadly remiss, but I shall take care that you suffer no unpleasantness from her."

Then seeing Violet's evident wonder at such

words from her, and fearing she was betraying herself, she turned to Norman as she added,—

“You see, Mr. Ashleigh, my daughter visits a great deal, and receives so much admiration abroad, that I suppose it is hard on her to expect her to be content to turn nurse at home.”

Norman could scarcely repress a curl of the lip as he listened to this speech, and the indignant thought rose to his mind, “And so Violet is to perform cheerfully the duties which your beautiful daughter declines!” but he was silent, and at this moment Eleanor herself entered the room, veiling her tumultuous emotion under a calm, dignified exterior. She was dressed with her usual elegance, and the flush of excitement improved her cold beauty. Little did Norman guess, as he took her offered hand and spoke his answer to her greeting, at the fierce passion, half love, half hatred, of which he was the object and which the sight of him had stirred up afresh.

Eleanor greeted Violet with a show of affection, for it was now her policy to pretend to be on sisterly terms with her; especially before Norman, for if ever a chance should

offer itself of injuring Violet, Eleanor knew it would be easier if Norman believed them to be on friendly, confidential terms.

The two girls were left alone for a short time, whilst Norman spoke to Mrs. Mortimer, as he had intended, on the subject of his marriage. In words not to be disputed he told her that he expected she would raise no opposition to its taking place at the time already fixed.

“But for our bereavement Violet would have been my wife now, Mrs. Mortimer, and with your own consent too. Thus you will pardon me saying that any attempt to keep Violet with you longer would be an act of injustice to both of us and an undue exercise of authority over her.”

If Mrs. Mortimer had intended disputing the point, she had changed entirely on making Norman's acquaintance. Her weak, frivolous nature could not resist his strong will, expressed with such quiet determination, and with many fair speeches she promised to raise no obstacles in the way of Violet's marriage at the wished-for time. And Norman's handsome looks and princely air had at once excited her woman's admiration and inclined

her in his favour, and she was nothing loth to be on friendly terms with him. She pressed him to be her guest for the night, but, as Violet expected, he politely declined, thanking Mrs. Mortimer for her offer ; and he left, promising to call in the morning before leaving London.

Thus Violet found herself once more alone with her stepmother and Eleanor, and the indescribable sense of solitude which overpowered her made it difficult to keep back her tears for a few minutes after Norman had gone. Mrs. Mortimer, not having seen Violet since her departure with Mrs. Ashleigh nearly three years before, was struck as Eleanor had been at Windermere by her remarkably improved looks and the peculiar grace of her figure and every movement. Even now, in her mourning dress, pale and tired as she was, Violet looked singularly attractive, and, as though to annoy Eleanor, Mrs. Mortimer openly expressed her admiration, thus giving Violet an insight already into the state of affairs between them.

During the remainder of the evening Eleanor continued her affectionate demeanour towards Violet, and expressed a hope that

she would be able to make herself happy and overcome her sorrow, even so far from Ashleigh Court.

Since she had seen Norman Mrs. Mortimer had resolved afresh to be no longer swayed by her ungrateful daughter, but to show kindness to Violet and gain her affection, if possible. By this course she hoped to obtain, on Violet's marriage, the long wished for *entrée* to Ashleigh Court, and this would be the next best thing to what she had once hoped, when she had coveted Ashleigh Court and its master for her own daughter.

Her kindness was so apparently real and earnest that Violet, thinking (and she was partly right) that, softened by her failing health, Mrs. Mortimer wished to repair her past neglect, readily forgave it all, and tried to show by her manner that she appreciated her present kindness.

It was not so easy for the haughty Eleanor to keep up her self-appointed *rôle* of friendliness towards Violet, and after a while she became somewhat silent and constrained, watching her mother's overtures with a hardly repressed sneer.

Feeling somewhat fatigued, Violet went

up early to her bedroom, which was not the one she had formerly occupied, but a larger, better one, which had been used only by visitors until now. Mrs. Mortimer had wished to show even in this her altered feeling towards Violet.

When alone, Violet sat and looked around her, thinking of her own little room at Ashleigh Court, and, going to the window, she gazed out into the street, with its lighted lamps and passing vehicles. She turned away with a shivering sigh, thinking of the sea and the hills and the gardens she had left so far away. Oh! if these four months would only pass quickly, she sighed, as she wondered if Norman would be very, very lonely during the period of waiting, and her heart confidently answered that he would.

How much seemed to have happened since she had last slept at Westford House! how much happiness had come to her since the well remembered day she left London with Mrs. Ashleigh! She had never seen Norman then, she had little dreamt of the great joy and love that were coming to her, and now, when it had been at its height, it was suddenly darkened by such great sorrow!

And the image of the dead came forcibly to her mind as she leant her head on her hand, trying to realize that she should never see that dear friend again, the dear friend who had been as her mother.

"But she died happily, knowing I should be Norman's wife; and I can make him happy, because he loves me; and we shall have her blessing through life," was the thought which consoled Violet's loving heart.

The next morning Mrs. Mortimer rose to breakfast, contrary to her usual custom, not wishing to miss seeing Norman when he called.

"You must be a great deal better this morning, mamma," said Eleanor, "to be up so early;" and as Mrs. Mortimer left the room for a minute Eleanor could not resist saying to Violet, "I must thank you, and the fact of Mr. Ashleigh having promised to call early, for the pleasure of mamma's company at breakfast this morning. It is a long time since she came down so early before."

But Violet, shocked at the scornful disrespect implied by Eleanor's tone, made no answer. After breakfast Mrs. Mortimer called Violet to her side as she lay upon her sofa.

“I know, my dear,” she said, “that it would have been pleasanter to you perhaps to have remained with your friend Mrs. Arnott near Ashleigh Court, instead of coming to us; but you will not regret the change I hope for so short a time, for I wish that we should mutually forget what was amiss in the past, and be really as mother and daughter. Eleanor’s temper is sadly soured, why I’m sure I can’t tell, for she has every indulgence. After all I have done for her, she is very ungrateful, and for her own sake I wish she were going to be married soon instead of you. I should like to have had you longer with me, my dear. I can’t tell you how much I admire Norman Ashleigh; he is so handsome, quite princely-looking, and so very gentlemanly. I shall be quite proud of you and your husband,” and she smiled persuasively.

In spite of her depression, Violet could hardly repress a smile at the easy way with which Mrs. Mortimer assumed that she was to forget the past injustice and enter at once on the new relation between them so as to be an affectionate, attentive daughter, and she was amused too at the conquest Norman

had made of her step-mother. But against Eleanor she felt indignant and full of surprise as to how she could so ill repay her fond, weak mother for all her indulgence. Violet felt that she must have become unbearable at times, or her mother could never speak as she did of the daughter who had once been her idol. These thoughts helped Violet better to subdue the distaste she felt for her new duties, and to stifle any bitter recollection in her sensitive heart of her stepmother's past unkindness and her own repulsed affection.

"She is ill and weak, and I cannot refuse at least to *try* and love her now. After all, she was dear papa's wife, and he left me in her care. He would have wished us to be fond of each other;" and from that moment Violet resolved to be as a daughter to her weak-minded, worldly stepmother, who now seemed really to regret the past, though the regret might be partly produced by selfish motives.

Norman was announced as Mrs. Mortimer and Violet sat together. He spoke pleasantly to Mrs. Mortimer, and then sat down by Violet, whose face had not yet lost the flush

which the announcement of his arrival had called forth. Eleanor had heard he was in the house, and soon entered the room, calm and pale as usual, not like Violet, with the betraying blush upon her face. The conversation between these four was naturally constrained, Mrs. Mortimer principally addressing herself to Norman, who, whilst answering her friendly speeches with suitable attention, was meditating also how he should contrive to see Violet alone before he left her. Eleanor perceived how insensible he was to her presence, hardly seeming to think of her at all, one way or the other, and her wounded passion raged fiercely in her heart, as she sat there so quietly, silently watching Norman and seeing every look he directed to Violet. At last Mrs. Mortimer, wishing to please Norman and knowing he expected it, rose and said smilingly,—

“You will excuse me and Eleanor, I dare say, Mr. Ashleigh, for a little while. Violet has plenty to say to you, no doubt. But you must not go without seeing us again;” and she left the room, followed by Eleanor, who was compelled to obey her mother in this instance. The resemblance between them

struck Norman forcibly as he saw them pass out together.

"Mrs. Mortimer is very like her daughter," he said to Violet, "but she can never have been quite so handsome."

"No, never," replied Violet; "but her ill-health has made her look very different from what I remember her before I left London. Norman, do you know, she is very kind to me now, and I am sure she wishes for my love."

"And I cannot spare any of it, Violet," he said, smiling sadly as he drew her closer to him. "My darling, I am glad for your sake, if she is in earnest, and if not, at least you will be spared outward unkindness. Forgive me if I say that Mrs. Mortimer's affection, even if real, is but a selfish one. You must promise me, Violet, not to endure any unkindness without telling me of it. But I do not fear you will have occasion to do so, for Mrs. Mortimer seems sincere in her regret for the past, and she has promised me faithfully to place no obstacles in our way when I come to claim you, little Violet. If I were not satisfied of this, I could hardly bear to leave you here again, my darling."

"Norman, I think it will be my fault

now if I am unhappy, for Eleanor is very kind too, and whenever I feel lonely, I can always think of you, and write to you," and she looked up fondly at Norman, who smiled as he replied,—

"And I intend to let you see me very often too, Violet, for I must come to look after you, to see that you don't get pale and ill in this great London."

"Oh, Norman, do you know, Mrs. Mortimer admires you so much. You'd be vain if I were to tell you all she said about you," and Violet smiled as she spoke, trying to conceal the aching of her heart as the moment drew near for Norman to leave her.

"For your sake, dear, I am glad Mrs. Mortimer approves of me, but for myself, I am afraid I don't sufficiently value her admiration. I am only proud of yours, little Violet."

Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor entered the room again shortly, and when Norman rose to take leave, the former was profuse in friendly hopes of soon seeing him again and expressions of pleasure at having made his acquaintance. Eleanor smiled with a stately grace as he shook hands with her, and as he looked

earnestly at her for a moment, the hope suggested itself, "Is he struck at last by my beauty?"

But he only said very earnestly, with some emotion,—

"Miss Gordon, will you take great care of Violet for me?" for it was easy to perceive that Violet's comfort and happiness would be more in Eleanor's power than in Mrs. Mortimer's.

Norman's words and manner stung afresh the disappointed love in Eleanor's heart, which was roused fiercely by this fresh evidence of his absorbing devotion to Violet.

"He bestowed even that little notice on me only in order to secure my goodwill towards Violet! If he only knew, he has strengthened my hatred to her instead!"

So she steeled herself against the eloquent look that appealed to her better feelings, and listened only to the jealous promptings of her wounded pride. Hers was not a great, generous nature, that could bear patiently its own unsought love, and rejoice to help on the happiness of its object, grudging not its own sacrifice.

She grasped eagerly at this chance of

appearing on friendly terms with Violet, whilst her heart was full of hate and thoughts of revenge.

“Whatever has been amiss in the past between Violet and myself, Mr. Ashleigh,” she said, “I wish to forget, and if she is willing, we shall be as sisters.”

She said this, not with more warmth than was usual with her, and accordingly, as she intended, she struck conviction of her sincerity into Norman’s heart more strongly than if she had used more forcible terms. He thought her cold and placid, selfish and worldly too, perhaps, but truthful and sincere. Only Louis Wilmot, besides herself, knew the hidden depths of Eleanor’s nature, for it had been to his interest to discover her real character and torture her secrets from her.

Violet left the room with Norman, and as they stood alone in the hall he clasped her in his embrace and kissed her pale cheek.

“God bless you, Violet, and may the day come quickly when I may take you home again, my little wife at last, for I want you sadly.”

And Violet bade him give her love to Mrs. Arnott and to dear old Mrs. Brownson,

and to all the dear places she had left for a time.

“And you’ll take care of Charley, poor little Charley!”

Norman knew that she prized her pony because it was his present above any other reason, and so he loved to hear her make this request. And at the moment of parting, Violet whispered to him, that when he visited his mother’s grave, he must always think how she wished to be with him, and he saw the tears which started to her eyes as she mentioned the dear name.

“Good-bye, then, my darling!”

“Good-bye, Norman!” and then the door, closing upon him, shut him out from Violet’s view.

He was going back to his lonely home, bereft now of his two dear ones, and as Violet stood alone, a strange, choking sensation came into her throat, and going upstairs, she cried out the tears that she had kept back all the morning. It was so terribly real, now that Norman was gone, and the new life must be entered upon, and the time, short as it was to be, would seem so very long and weary.

That very first evening Mr. Wilmot called, as if by chance; but the truth was that Eleanor had told him of Violet's expected arrival in a way which he well understood as an implied invitation. She never welcomed him herself, but it would be pleasant to her to see Violet annoyed by his presence.

As he entered the room, Violet could not repress a momentary look of dislike and painful surprise, and Louis Wilmot saw the look with a revengeful satisfaction.

The knowledge that for some time to come it would be in his power to annoy the young girl who had rejected him was very pleasant to him.

Haughty Norman Ashleigh was not present now to bestow those withering glances upon him, and Eleanor Gordon would only rejoice to see Violet subjected to his distasteful attentions.

With his usual *empressement*, he addressed himself to Violet, expressing his regret for her bereavement, but the pleasure he felt too at meeting her again.

Before he left that evening, Violet saw only too plainly that Mr. Wilmot meant to ignore the occurrences at Windermere, and persecute her with his useless addresses.

What could he mean? Why would he not leave her in peace now at least? And her proud heart grew strongly indignant against him, rendering her manner to him so cold and distant that Eleanor was forced to admit to herself that even she could not have repelled any one with more dignity.

As the days passed, Mrs. Mortimer began to congratulate herself more than ever on having insisted on Violet's return to her, for even her weak, selfish nature could not but feel the germs of a real affection for the young girl she had once so cruelly neglected, and who now so generously forgave her and behaved to her as her own daughter ought to have done. It was no easy task at first, to one of Violet's proud, sensitive nature, and still less so with the soreness of her sorrow still fresh for Mrs. Ashleigh's loss and the pain of being so far from Norman; but she found her reward in seeing her stepmother's growing affection for her. The stormy scenes between Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor were less frequent now that the former no longer stood in need of her daughter's presence and attention; but Violet soon perceived how utterly Eleanor neglected

her mother, visiting and seeking amusement and accepting invitations independently of her.

This unfeeling conduct was inexplicable to Violet, and there were times when she could not help showing in her face what she thought of it, thus causing Eleanor's hatred to be augmented against her. Violet's mourning excused her from being included in the invitations received by Eleanor, so that Mrs. Mortimer was no longer left alone as she had so often been formerly during the evenings.

Violet's happiest moments now were those spent in reading Norman's letters and in writing to him, envying her very letters as she directed them to dear Ashleigh Court. And as the days went on, very, very slowly, she began to pine wearily for the sea and the hills and the freedom she had so lately enjoyed, for the crowded thoroughfares she had now to frequent were sorely distasteful to Violet in her sorrow, not having even the benefit of novelty, for she had known them before only too well during her desolate childhood. Nelly Woodford wrote often and affectionately, and her cheery yet sympa-

thetic letters were very pleasant to Violet in her loneliness.

During the first fortnight succeeding Violet's arrival in London, Mr. Wilmot was a constant visitor at Westford House, and Violet, much as she wished, could do nothing to prevent his coming. Mrs. Mortimer liked him, and encouraged his visits, and, ignorant of what had occurred between him and Violet, did not perceive the latter's dislike of him. More than once he called in the evening, when Eleanor was out and Violet could find no excuse for leaving Mrs. Mortimer's side, thus being forced to endure his company. It seemed as though he delighted in knowing her dismay whenever he was announced, and in seeing her silent indignation at his attentions or the sentimental glances he bestowed on her, for no effort of hers to repel him caused him to desist from his annoyance. She guessed that he was pleased to revenge himself on her for rejecting him, and his utter want of generosity made her regard him with even more repugnance than before. After some consideration Violet had resolved to make no mention of him in her letters to Norman, wishing to spare the latter the irrita-

tion she knew he would feel if he were made aware even of the bare fact of Mr. Wilmot's frequent visits to Westford House. It went against her nature to have to conceal anything from Norman, but she did it for the best.

About a fortnight after Violet's arrival in London Norman wrote to her that he intended coming to see her very soon, and she determined to tell him all then, even Mr. Wilmot's annoyance to her, and she knew Norman would express his wish to Mrs. Mortimer that she would in future discourage his visits.

"Norman will do it better than I could," she said to herself, "and I can tell him all so much better myself than by a letter, so as to make him as little angry as possible," and so she waited anxiously for the letter which was to tell her the exact day of his coming.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE evening, two or three days after Violet had heard that Norman was coming to see her, Mr. Wilmot was calling at Westford House. He had come in on some slight excuse, and Mrs. Mortimer had asked him to spend the evening with them. Eleanor was at home to-night, and they were sitting all together in the drawing-room. Mrs. Mortimer begged Violet to sing a favourite song of hers, evidently wishing it so much that she felt it would be unkind to refuse.

She had sung but very little since her arrival in London, and it was painful yet to do so; but she rose now quietly to comply, and as she sat down at the piano, Louis Wilmot was at her side in a moment.

"I do not require anyone to turn over for me, thank you," she said; but though her manner plainly expressed her wish that he would leave her side, he would not be repulsed, but remained where he was, and

she was obliged to sing as well as she could, for she did not like to cause a scene by getting up and leaving the room. She was about half through the song, Louis Wilmot still bending over her, close by her side, when there was a ring at the hall door, and a minute afterwards Norman Ashleigh was shown into the room. Violet stopped singing at once, as he was announced, but Norman had seen the way in which Louis Wilmot bent over her as she sat, and there was a triumphant joy in Eleanor's heart as she saw his gaze as it rested on her that moment, half of surprise, half sternness. In her agitation at seeing Norman so unexpectedly, together with the annoyance from which she was suffering, Violet blushed confusedly, and could hardly advance to meet him, so that Mrs. Mortimer was the first to shake hands with him.

"You will be surprised to see me this evening, Mrs. Mortimer," he said; "but I have received news which will oblige me to leave home at once for a short time, or I should not have been in London for two or three days yet."

He shook hands silently with Violet and Eleanor, merely bowing to Mr. Wilmot, who

returned the salutation superciliously. At once then Norman turned again to Mrs. Mortimer as he said,—

“If you will excuse Violet and myself for a few minutes, I should like to speak to her.”

Violet led the way to the next room, followed by Norman, and as they passed out, there was a peculiar smile on Louis Wilmot's face as he whispered to Eleanor,—

“If I mistake not, Miss Mortimer will have a little jealous lecture to listen to as well as the news her lover brings;” but Eleanor only shrugged her shoulders and did not answer.

As soon as they were alone Norman closed the door and turned to Violet, who had heard with dread the news of his going away, and wondered tremblingly what he had to communicate. He did not kiss her or take her hand as usual, but said somewhat impatiently,—

“Violet, is Mr. Wilmot often here?”

“Yes, Norman,” and she could say no more in her dismay at his tone and manner.

“You can hardly wonder at my being surprised at it, as you so carefully avoided

mentioning him in your letters," and Norman's tone was quick and stern, and its bitterness stung Violet's sensitive heart as she stood by, bewildered by his words.

Oh! why had she not told him? She had refrained from doing so because she wished to spare him pain and irritation, and now he mistrusted her! The pain of the knowledge was so great as to make her proud but loving heart forget to resent his suspicion.

"Oh, Norman!" and there was a world of sorrow in the simple exclamation, then more calmly she continued, "Can you not guess why I never told you of Mr. Wilmot's visits? I could not prevent them, and you know how I must have tried to discourage him; but if I had told you, the knowledge would only have given you useless displeasure, and so I resolved to spare it to you by saying nothing until you came, and I could explain everything. It was very hard to keep anything from you, Norman, and perhaps I was wrong; but I did it for the best, and I did not fear you would ever mistrust me, even when you came in now and found Mr. Wilmot with me at the piano.

I meant to tell you of the annoyance I suffer from him, but I wanted you to be as little angry as possible. That is why I waited to tell you myself, Norman."

The tears were standing in the soft brown eyes, and the voice of gentle reproach as it spoke the simple words had obliterated the jealous suspicion in Norman's heart, making him hate himself for it. How could he have been so mad, he asked himself, as to let his unreasonable pride once more master him and cause him to grieve by a cruel suspicion the tender heart which had been so anxious to save him even a moment's pain! Had he not resolved never to make Violet miserable again by his mad suspicions?

"Violet, forgive me!" and the young man's voice shook with emotion.

Violet looked up, and in another moment she was folded in Norman's embrace and had received his fervent kiss upon her lips.

"My darling! if I could but unsay my unthinking suspicion! Can you forget it was ever uttered, my generous Violet?"

"I have forgotten it already, Norman," whispered Violet.

"I cannot forgive myself so easily," my

darling ; “but I was maddened by the sight of that man. To think that he has dared to pursue you even now with his impertinence, my little Violet, that I am so soon to call my wife ! ”

How could he for a moment have entertained a suspicion that Violet was not so wholly indifferent to Louis Wilmot and so averse to his attentions as she had made him believe—how could he? Norman asked himself, in his repentance for having caused Violet a moment’s pain. But Violet smiled fondly while the tears stood in her eyes.

“Norman, you must promise not to vex yourself about it, it is over now, you know,” she whispered persuasively. “It was very painful to sing at all this evening, but I could not refuse mamma. And it was natural you should be surprised on first coming in and finding Mr. Wilmot with us, as I had never named him ; but you know all about it now, and I am quite happy. Won’t you believe me, don’t you see that I know you could not help that suspicion, that you did not really entertain it, and that I’m going to forget all about it ? ”

And he could not resist her earnest tone

and wistful smile, but smiled with her, and promised not to reproach himself again.

“But you must let me speak to Mrs. Mortimer, Violet. She cannot refuse to discourage Mr. Wilmot’s visits when I tell her that you find him impertinent and that you dislike his society. I must tell her this much, or she might suspect (not knowing all) that it was I who felt jealous or uneasy, and I could not bear she should think so for a moment, my darling!”

They were silent for a minute, and then Norman took Violet’s hand, as he continued,—

“And now, Violet, I must tell you something that will surprise you. My aunt is coming home, is actually on her way to England.”

Violet started and looked enquiringly at Norman.

“She left Calcutta before my letter reached her, telling her about my mother, and she is now on her way home. I cannot tell you my surprise on receiving a letter from her two days since, written before she set out, and containing such unexpected news. It seems that she has entertained the idea

some time, but has not named it in her letters to us. Her health is so completely restored, she writes; she is so much stronger even than when I left her, that the doctors are of opinion that with care she will be able to reside in England. It is terribly lonely now, out there by herself, she says, and she does not grow accustomed to it, as she had hoped, so that the loneliness and constant recollection of my uncle were likely to prove injurious to her health. An opportunity offered itself which she did not like to lose, of disposing of her house and grounds, and that is why she commenced her journey so soon after taking the final resolution. If she had only been well enough to have come home with me, Violet! I cannot help feeling anxious about her, though she has her two English maids with her. Poor aunt! she writes so hopefully and joyfully about seeing us again and being at Ashleigh Court once more. It will be such a dreadful blow when she knows that my mother is not alive to welcome her!" and Norman's voice faltered visibly. "She may know it by now, for my letter will have been sent after her. She tells me how much she longs to see you, Violet, and to

welcome you as my wife, little thinking of what has happened. She promises to write again on reaching Alexandria, where she will remain some days, so that in a day or two now I may receive a letter from her. You will guess what I am going to say. I must go to meet her and accompany her home. She will be so overcome by the news of my mother's death, that it may affect her health in such a way as to make it necessary I should be with her during the rest of her journey. I shall not, I expect, be absent more than a fortnight from the time I set out, and when I return, it will be so much the nearer to the day that will make you my wife, and I want you sadly, my darling!" and Norman looked tenderly at the girlish face looking up to his.

Violet did not speak for a few minutes. She knew it was foolish, but she could not help a sickening sensation of dread at the thought of Norman's coming absence. She had thought to have been his wife by this time, and now it was strangely hard to know that he was going so far away, even though it was only for so short a time. The very idea seemed to conjure up undefined

fears, overpowering her surprise at the news of Mrs. Lacy's return. She turned to Norman with a sudden impulse and with a yearning look in her eyes,—

“Oh, Norman! you must come back safe and very soon.”

He smiled as he drew her towards him.

“I shall have my aunt to take care of me, you know.”

“I shall be so glad to know her, Norman. I can hardly believe she is really coming home. If it could only have been so before!” and the wish was echoed in both their hearts as they thought of her they had so lately lost.

“Violet, my mother would be glad that we should have my aunt to take her place on our wedding day. She was always her dearest friend, and I know how she would have been consoled if she could have known it on her death-bed.”

They were both silent for a few moments, and then seeing the tears in Violet's eyes, Norman said cheerfully,—

“My aunt speaks of establishing herself as near to us as possible, but she must remain at Ashleigh Court at least until she has wel-

comed you back there, and then I am afraid I shall want no one but my little wife. Violet," he went on, "I do hope that this favourable state of my aunt's health will be permanent, and that her doctors will prove right in thinking her strong enough to bear our English climate after so long a residence in India."

"We can take care of her together, Norman, you know," said Violet.

"*You* will, Violet. You can do it so well, my darling," and she knew of what he was thinking. "But, now that I have time to look at you properly, you are pale and weary looking," and Norman's eyes rested earnestly on her face as he took both her hands in his. "You are kept indoors, I can see, by your attendance on Mrs. Mortimer, or at best, the London streets and parks are poor substitutes for our hills, to a little country girl like you. Am I not right?"

"Well, I do long so much sometimes for the sea and the hills and the gardens, Norman," said Violet frankly, with a smile; "but I shall get used to London again soon, I suppose."

"Thank heaven you will not have to stay

here long!" said Norman. "Violet, if to-morrow is fine I shall carry you off with me into the country for a few hours. I cannot bear to see you look so pale and tired, and the fresh air will do you good. I shall remain in London until I receive my aunt's letter from Alexandria; I told Mrs. Brownson to forward it to me at once. My aunt calculated it would be about this time she would be there. And before I leave you, Violet, I must speak to Mrs. Mortimer, for I cannot go away knowing that Mr. Wilmot has it in his power to annoy you with his insolent attentions. Why, are you not my wife already, my darling!" and Norman looked much agitated.

"The time will come very soon, Norman, dear," whispered Violet; "we have only to wait little more than three months now," and while her heart sank at the thought, she tried to smile hopefully up into her lover's face.

When Norman and Violet returned to the drawing-room, Louis Wilmot and Eleanor were secretly chagrined at seeing no evidence of any unpleasantness between them, and Mr. Wilmot could not resist the pleasure of

being markedly attentive to Violet in Norman's presence, exasperating him by keeping close by her side and directing all his conversation to her. At last, something in the haughty, stern expression of Norman's eyes as Mr. Wilmot met them fixed upon him warned him that he might possibly be indulging his agreeable revenge to a dangerous extent, so he rose and wisely took his leave without having courage to encounter again that steady gaze which had made him feel so uncomfortable and which was so unlike his own restless, shifting glance. He did not go, however, without exchanging a look of satisfaction with Eleanor on hearing of Norman's contemplated journey to Alexandria. Mrs. Mortimer was profuse in expressing her good wishes for Norman's safe and pleasant journey, and his aunt's continued good health, and her own pleasure at the prospect of making Mrs. Lacy's acquaintance, but Eleanor said nothing at all. She sat listening in silence to her mother's speeches and watching with satisfaction the evidence in Violet's wistful eyes of the pain and uneasiness she was feeling at the thought of her approaching parting with Norman.

The next morning, according to promise, Norman came and took Violet with him some miles out of the city, and though spring was not yet come, the sight of the fields and country lanes refreshed her wonderfully as she and Norman walked side by side alone together again. She had never felt so cheerful since Mrs. Ashleigh's death, and Norman loved to see her smile and hear her talk as she had not done since he left home previous to his mother's illness. Very often in the future did Violet think with painful remembrance of this pleasant walk they were now enjoying together.

But she could not divest herself of her tender reluctance to part with Norman, the wish that he had not to go so far away from her, even for so short a time. Situated as she was, she must necessarily feel this short separation more than another might do, who had a dear home and loving friends. In becoming Norman's wife, Violet would have to leave for him no dear parents, no sister or brother; he would stand to her in the place of all of these as well as that of her husband.

"Norman," she said, as they were on their

way back to London, "I wish your journey was over, and that you were safe at home again with Mrs. Lacy!" and the soft eyes looked up with a yearning gaze.

"We must look forward to this time next month, Violet, when I trust it will be so, if I start so soon as I expect."

"When you went to India, Norman, what a long time you had to stay there!" she said thoughtfully, speaking more to herself than to him now.

"And all through that long year, I did not know that the little girl at home who was so precious to me, who was never out of my thoughts, cared anything for me, at least as I hoped and longed that she would do. I dared not ask her, thereby wronging (though I did it for the best) the true, woman's heart hidden under her childish appearance. I had not the sweet certainty of your love, which I can take with me now, my darling, wherever I go."

"And I have yours, Norman, to keep me from being lonely," she said, looking up amid her blushes, with a fond, trusting smile.

On returning to Westford House, Norman took the opportunity to speak, as he had

intended, to Mrs. Mortimer, Eleanor chancing fortunately to be absent.

By speaking in Violet's presence, he proved to Mrs. Mortimer that it was by her wish and consent he made his request concerning Mr. Wilmot, which he did as delicately and briefly as possible. She was surprised, as they had expected, but was sincere in saying that she really had not been aware that Violet suffered any annoyance from Mr. Wilmot. The truth was, she had been too much engaged with the attention and flattery her visitor offered to herself to perceive very particularly his behaviour to Violet. But wishing to keep in Norman's good graces, and feeling perhaps that some consideration was due to her stepdaughter for her goodness to her—for the better part of her nature had been roused with her growing affection for Violet—she promised at once to do all in her power to discourage Mr. Wilmot's visits and to show her displeasure at his behaviour to Violet. Secretly she could not help thinking that they had been mistaken in fancying him impertinent.

"If Eleanor with her greater beauty was no attraction for Mr. Wilmot," she thought,

"I don't see how Violet can have any. If she were not engaged it would be different, for the money might be the charm."

"My dear girl," she said aloud, turning to Violet, "you ought to have complained to me before; I had no idea that Mr. Wilmot was so disagreeable to you."

Violet blushed painfully. She could not tell Mrs. Mortimer that her words would not have had the same effect as Norman's.

"I don't think Violet is fond of complaining, Mrs. Mortimer," said Norman, coming to her rescue; "she thinks the unpleasant duty suits me better," he added, with a smile.

And when he and Violet were alone again, Norman said to her,—

"Violet, I think she will keep her promise, and if so, I feel less uneasy in leaving you. Mr. Wilmot is hardly capable of appreciating your delicacy in keeping so secret the offer he made you, and I almost think you might have told Mrs. Mortimer, to let her understand better. But as you please, dear, of course. To think that he dares to insult both of us by his hateful impertinence, my darling!"

"Norman, you promised to try and forget

it, you remember. And I cannot bear to see you angry," and the low, persuasive tone and loving glance soothed Norman's rising indignation, and he spoke no more of Mr. Wilmot just then.

The very next day Norman received his aunt's expected letter, which had been forwarded at once from Ashleigh Court on its arrival. Mrs. Lacy wrote from Alexandria, immediately on her safe arrival there. She had not yet received Norman's letter, and therefore was ignorant still of Mrs. Ashleigh's death when she wrote. It was terribly painful to Norman and Violet to read her letter, full of hopeful anticipation and pleasant accounts of her journey, which she said had not fatigued her, so far, as much as she had expected. Norman at once set about the sorrowful task of again writing to her the sad news, for if he wrote merely that he was coming to meet her, she would suspect something amiss, perhaps the truth, and the suspense would be harder almost to bear than the reality.

And so in two days Norman must start on his journey, and Violet's heart was very heavy as the hour drew near for their tem-

porary separation. Norman felt singularly loth to leave her, more so even than the occasion required; he could not help being strangely uneasy, though he knew Violet no longer suffered unkindness from her step-mother and Eleanor. He would not distress her by saying much about it, but he wished now more strongly than ever that she had been allowed to remain with Mrs. Arnott. It was not likely that Mrs. Mortimer could put a stop to Mr. Wilmot's visits entirely and suddenly, and this knowledge fretted Norman in spite of her promise to shield Violet from annoyance. Why had he ever crossed their path, he, this adventurer? for such Norman believed him to be. What a constant irritation he had been ever since they first met him! Norman was fated to see Louis Wilmot once again before leaving London, for he called at Westford House the evening previous to Norman's departure. The latter was now staying in the house, having this time accepted Mrs. Mortimer's invitation to be her guest during the few days he remained in London, for he and Violet could ill spare each other's society on the eve of his going so far away. Mr. Wil-

mot may have remarked Mrs. Mortimer's unusual coldness to him this evening; but he was not to be discouraged so easily. Eleanor was never otherwise than politely cold to him; but he and she tacitly understood each other. She still kept up the guise of friendship towards Violet, especially in Norman's presence, though she was beginning to tell herself it was of little use, for it would never be possible to work mischief between them.

Mr. Wilmot had little chance this evening of offering his usual civilities to Violet, for Norman sat close by her side, wholly monopolizing her; but as he bade her "good-night," he could not resist the temptation to exasperate Norman by bestowing upon her a sentimental glance of his dark eyes, retaining her hand at the same time so long as to provoke her to withdraw it indignantly. Norman's resolution was taken in an instant. He followed Mr. Wilmot into the hall, and when there alone with him, looked him steadily in the face as he addressed him,—

"Mr. Wilmot, if you possess any of the feelings of a gentleman, which is difficult at times to believe, I appeal to you whether

it is honourable to behave as you are doing to Miss Mortimer, and I ask you to give me your word now that you will desist from your ungenerous persecution of her. If you refuse, it will be easy to find some other way of shielding my promised wife from your distasteful attentions during my absence."

Louis Wilmot turned an evil glance upon Norman as he spoke,—

"Miss Mortimer certainly can do little that escapes the watchful eyes of her lover. But are you quite so sure that my attentions, as you please to call them, are so very distasteful to her as appears to you?"

"Mr. Wilmot! you once insulted *me*, and I overlooked it. Are you aware it may be more dangerous to expect me to bear an insult against *her*?" and Norman's pale face was terribly stern, while his voice shook with fierce indignation.

Something in his look made Louis Wilmot quail, in a manner that impressed Norman with the idea that he feared that he, Norman, had discovered some guilty secret of which he was the possessor. But in another minute he had regained his customary calmness, and replied so quietly as to surprise Norman,—

“I might, if I chose, remind you of more than one occasion on which *you* have been insulting to *me*; but I abstain from doing so. From Miss Mortimer I have never experienced anything but courtesy; but if it is as you say, that even my common civilities are so unpleasant to her, my attachment to her (for you know of it, of course) has been too sincere for me to continue them, and you may go away having my word that I will observe the most distant demeanour towards her, which even you could exact, for I should be sorry to see her subjected to any unpleasantness on my account,” and with a polite bow, Louis Wilmot opened the door for himself and left the house, leaving Norman filled with surprise at his easy calmness and contempt for his cowardice, for he could not believe it was from any other motive that he gave the required promise so readily.

If Norman could have seen into Louis Wilmot's heart as he spoke so calmly, and have beheld the storm of evil passions so carefully concealed there by a painful effort, the better to serve his own ends, Norman, badly as he thought of him, would have had his impressions much strengthened.

Violet had felt terribly uneasy during Norman's absence from the room, fearing that he and Mr. Wilmot would come to an open rupture, and she felt that the latter would be a dangerous enemy. As Norman entered the room again he saw the troubled look on Violet's face, and sitting down by her, he said in a low voice, with a smile,—

“You need not look so uneasy, Violet. Mr. Wilmot has not harmed me ; we parted amicably enough. I undertook to speak to him myself, and I think he is now aware that he may not persecute you with impunity.”

That night Violet lay long awake, recalling vividly the eve of Norman's departure for India, the night that he had bade adieu to her in his mother's presence, and she had wept so passionately afterwards when alone. But then he had been going for an indefinite time, without knowing she loved him, and while she was still ignorant of his love for her.

It was different now ; she was his promised wife, loved by him as she had once hardly dared to hope for ; but yet it was perhaps all the harder to see him depart on a long journey, which the anxious heart whispered might be full of perils.

Violet went to the station with Norman next morning. Eleanor had bade him adieu with her usual calmness, but with the strange mixture of love and hatred raging in her heart as she watched him drive away with Violet by his side. At the station they walked up and down the platform together as they waited for Norman's train to come up.

"You must take care of yourself, little Violet, while I am away, and we must both hope the time will pass very quickly," and Norman spoke smilingly to hide the sadness in his heart.

If she had only been his wife, to have gone with him !

"I must try to look forward to the day when I shall come here to meet you and Mrs. Lacy, Norman," and she looked up with a yearning wistfulness. "Do you know, Nelly says she is going to overwhelm me with letters while you are away, to keep up my spirits."

"Miss Nelly must have great faith in her powers of amusing;" but I think her letters do you good too, Violet, and I must thank her specially when I see her again. I don't think she tries now to convert

you to those doctrines of hers which she used to defend so warmly against me ? ”

“ I think she finds I’m rather hard to convert, Norman. And perhaps she is beginning to think already that she was wrong, after all.”

“ Ah, that would be something wonderful, indeed, to hear of your independent Nelly ! ”

Here the train came up, and as Norman took his seat, Violet stood by the carriage door talking with him until the last minute, and bravely trying to keep down her emotion. A few minutes before the train started, Norman, who had a carriage to himself, drew Violet inside, and, unperceived by the passers-by, stole a kiss from her lips,—

“ Good-bye, my darling, I shall be with you in thought until I return to you. Tell me again that you have quite forgiven me the other evening, my little wife so soon to be,” and as he held her hand, Norman’s eyes were fixed on her with a world of love in their gaze.

“ Oh, Norman ! why do you let it trouble you so ? Indeed I never think of it. It showed me how much you cared for my love, how badly you could bear to lose it, that was

all, Norman," and the colour rose to her cheeks as she spoke the fond assurance.

"Thank you, my generous Violet," Norman whispered fervently, as she left his side and stood again by the carriage door.

"You must write me very long letters, Violet, you know," he said, as the train began to move.

"Oh, yes, indeed I will, and come back safe, Norman, and very soon," and there were tears on her cheeks as she looked wistfully after the train long after it was out of sight.

And when at last Violet looked around her, she felt terribly lonely, and a yearning sigh escaped her as she turned and left the platform.

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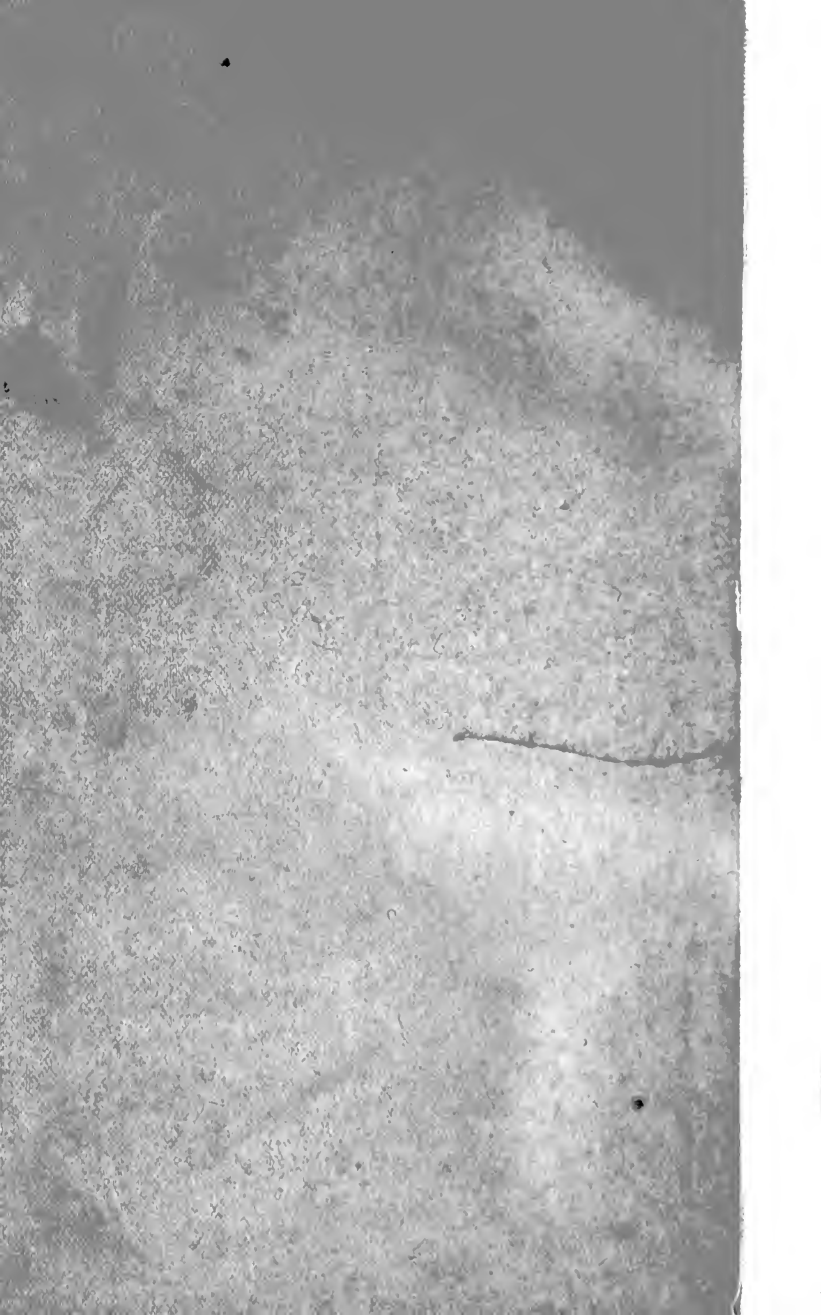
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